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BEYOND

FANTASY FICTION

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DEMING

ALGIS
BUDRYS

FRANKLIN
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ZENNA
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Cover by: René Vidner

ROBERT GUINN, Publisher

H. L. GOLD, Editor

EVELYN FAJGE, Assistant Editor

W. L. VAN DER POEL, Art Director

JOAN De MARIO, Production Manager

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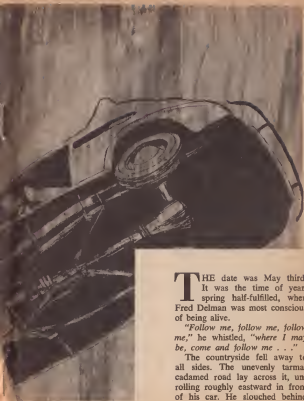


The Real People

By **ALGIS BUDRYS**

*Delman didn't have to trust to luck, for
he was the master of fate itself. But then how had
it turned and battered and robbed and thwarted him?*

Illustrated by **ASHMAN**



THE date was May third. It was the time of year, spring half-fulfilled, when Fred Delman was most conscious of being alive.

"Follow me, follow me, follow me," he whistled, *"where I may be, come and follow me . . ."*

The countryside fell away to all sides. The unevenly tarmac-damed road lay across it, unrolling roughly eastward in front of his car. He slouched behind

the wheel, the breeze from the open windows washing over him, as he sang the words in his mind while he whistled. The sunlight sparkled down out of the cloud-touched sky, and the bird songs from the trees lining the road, came in faintly over the motor's low hum. He reached out and touched a button on the radio.

"No matter where the road may lead," he whistled.

"Or what its turnings be," the singer on the radio took up, the buzzing orchestra behind her fleshing out the single strain of his whistle.

He was conscious of no particular surprise. It was a popular song. The fact that he had tuned in at exactly the precise moment was not specially remarkable, either. It had happened before.

He came to a corner and turned the car leisurely out of the secondary road, engine idling, onto the sunlit white swath of the highway. He did not see the ice cream truck that snarled out from over a hill and smashed into him, but, as he felt his back wheels leave the ground, he saw the windshield ballooning up at his face.

The car twisted like a gored steel buffalo, skidding across the highway in a howl of metal. It wiped its side clean of door-handles, snapped around, and rocked to rest in a ditch, a trail

of glass sown across the highway and the pulped roadside weeds.

He found himself sitting on the padded fabric of his car's inverted roof, a rivulet of blood running off his scalp, down his shoulder and arm, soaking into the cloth.

I

THAT was the accident memory.

He lay on his back, feeling the texture of bedsheets against his bare skin where the front-to-back nightshirt had twisted open.

Habitually, he slept naked. Moreover, he slept with his heels hooked over the edges of the mattress; not close together as they were now, with the full pressure of sheets and a tight blanket against his upthrust toes. He moved his feet apart.

His head was cupped in sunk-en puffiness. Reaching behind him, he folded the pillow over and thrust it back under his head, resting his neck against the thick fold. He began to move his body, searching for pain, the constriction of adhesive tape or the needle-claws of stitching, the clumsiness of splints or casts, but he found nothing. He pulled the sheets away, and put his hands to his face, but nowhere were there bandages, or scars beyond those he normally carried.

Delman frowned. How long had he been in the hospital?

He found no answer in his memories. There were rag-tag ends of recollection here and there—memories of days tumbling into weeks in black-on-white sequence, of being wheeled down corridors, of bright operating lights. Men stood over his bed in whispered consultation. But the sum of these fragments was no coherent whole, and the fragments themselves were blurred with remembered pain, spiderwebbed with jagged white-hot cracks of agony.

He reached to the night table beside him, found a fresh package of cigarettes and his lighter beside an ashtray, and lay back on the bed, his eyes on the slowly twisting spiral of smoke.

He was well. Then why had he been kept in the hospital so long? Why was it only now that complete consciousness returned?

He considered the possibility of amnesia. Loss of memory could be caused by a number of things—shock, organic damage to the brain, or the overwhelming need to avoid some excruciating reality. And yet there was something different in his case, for the fragments of memory were there. Broken and twisted, incoherent, but there, and they were of the most painful hours since the collision.

He had no way of knowing the thought processes of amnesia.

Perhaps even an amnesiac who had lost the most of his lifetime would, at some time, return to his former consciousness and *know* there had been no inexplicable interval. It had been a serious accident, he knew.

Nevertheless, Delman began to search once more through the shards of the remembered past, in quest of a better answer.

THE seat cushion doubled his back, pressing him forward across his knees. His face was filmed in red, and one smashed arm hung limply against his thigh. He could hear voices outside the car—a murmur of excitement overborne by the fumbling sound of someone tugging at a jammed door. His head was splitting—no, was split.

Get me out!

Two voices hung in the air beside his bed.

"We'll want another set of X-rays," the older voice said. It was calm, reflecting the hundreds of broken skulls its owner had seen in his life. "The other plates were clear enough, I suppose, but we'd better check that healing."

"Yes, sir," the intern answered. "I've never seen such rapid progress, either."

"I have," the older doctor answered drily.

Delman tried to open his eyes and look up at the two men, but

the lids were pressed down by the swaddling of bandages across his face.

"I can't understand it," the intern said, his voice defensive against another deflation. "The way he must have bounced around inside that car, it's a wonder he didn't smash himself against the dashboard or the wheel."

"I wouldn't exactly call that face a wonder—not in any miraculous sense," the doctor reminded him.

"God, that windshield must have molded itself over his face before it snapped out!" the intern said quickly.

"I know," the older doctor said.

They turned and walked away. Just before the door of his room clicked shut, Delman heard the intern say "Plastic surge—" and then the door closed, and he was left alone, aware, even in the fog-giness of morphine that forestalled memory of his broken arm, that there was something wrong, something about his condition that was incomprehensible.

HE lay uncomfortably on the bed, his body clammy with sweat, and remembered further:

The day nurse was a slim girl with jet-black hair under her starched cap. She moved a shade less than gracefully, her voice a little higher than it might have been. Her delicate hands were red

at the knuckles, and her nails were cut too short to harmonize with the length and taper of her fingers.

She doesn't belong at work in a hospital, Delman had thought the first time he saw her. The girl was not made for unrelieved tension, nor for the kind of work she was doing. Probably there should have been two people assigned to the duties she filled by herself.

Quickly, working rapidly, she moved around his room, a line of standard nurse-patient talk always on her lips from the time she firmly opened the door until she shut it carefully behind her.

"Well, and how are we this morning?" she asked, cranking up the head of his bed.

"You're fine," he answered. "How am I?"

She smiled brilliantly, fleetingly. "Whoo! That's a pretty old one, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is." He reached over and took a sip of water. "Thanks for bringing the cigarettes."

She looked up, puzzled. "I didn't bring you any cigarettes."

"They were here this morning, and I ran out of them last night," he said.

She brought her smile into play again. "Now, look, if you ran out of them last night, how would I know about it? I'm Day, remem-

ber? Maybe one of the Nights has a crush on you."

He grinned conspiratorially and shrugged. "Maybe," he admitted. "Or maybe I just lost count. One of life's little mysteries." He dismissed the problem as being no real problem at all. "Maybe you can do something for me, though." He ran his hand over his jaw. "Any chance of you finding me a razor? I'm getting kind of shaggy."

THE memories jarred to a shocked stop. He sat up in the bed, jamming his cigarette into the ashtray.

How had he run his hand over his face?

Plastic surgery was not a part of routine hospital accident treatment. What had happened? There was no possibility of a mistake, for he could remember the pressure of gauze on his eyelids, and the sight of glass before his face.

And most important—and worst—he could remember the sickness in his stomach as he felt the slick of blood running down over his blurred features.

The door of his room clicked open, and a doctor stepped in. He was a short man, stocky and square-faced, with blunt features that had been assembled honestly, but without great care. His short brown hair was sprinkled with gray—not the romantic temple-whitening of the cinematic Man

In White, but the dun coloration of a man wearing out with work.

"Good morning, Doctor," Delman said.

"Good morning, Mr. Delman," the doctor replied, walking over to the bed and taking Delman's pulse. His voice had the remembered intonations of the older man who had discussed his case with the intern. He lifted one of Delman's eyelids and nodded. "I think we'll let you go home today, Mr. Delman. As I said yesterday, you'll probably feel pretty generally sore for a few weeks, but there were no actual injuries. How do you feel?"

"Fine, Doctor," he answered, his voice matter-of-fact.

"All right, then. Any time you're ready, just check out with the reception desk downstairs." The voice was pleasant, saying nothing it had not said as a thousand previous patients were discharged.

"Thank you, Doctor. I'm glad to know it wasn't anything serious." Delman smiled with embarrassment. "I must have lost track of time, a little. Could you tell me the date?"

"It's May tenth," the doctor said cordially, and left.

Delman lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying to understand what had happened to him. It was only a week since the accident. What of the days, the remembered pain?

He got up and found his clothes in the closet. As he dressed, putting on the suit with its car-seat creases across the jacket, knotting the unbloodied tie, his mouth twisted in bitter amusement. He was no amnesiac. His trouble was not loss of memory—no, not *loss*.

"Tell me, Doctor," he asked in imagined conversation, "*how would you classify the possession of false memories?*"

"As a form of delusion," the doctor in his mind replied.

THE hospital corridor was a gauntlet. As he walked its length slowly, memories returned of rubber-tired stretcher tables and of himself being wheeled down this same corridor to Surgery and to X-ray. With them came the smell of anesthetics, the sting of needles, the gently drifting spell of morphia. He remembered the sway of that frantic run in the ambulance, and the steady spider bite of intravenous feeding.

None of it was true.

He rode in an elevator to the main floor and walked over to the reception desk. A nurse passed him—Leila Gillespie, the day nurse. She smiled and winked.

"Leaving us, huh?"

"That's right," he smiled back.

"Well, good luck, Mr. Delman."

"Thanks."

She was gone with a whisper of her nylon uniform.

At the reception desk, he signed out and paid a bill for a week's use of the private room, together with observational care and one set of X-rays. The receptionist gave him the keys to his car.

"I checked with the garage for you, Mr. Delman," she said. "You can pick up your car any time you want."

"Thanks very much," he said, and stood irresolutely in front of the desk, frowning down at the familiar worn keycase in his hand. He bounced it in his palm.

He was about to turn away, but then he said, "I'd like to speak to the doctors who were on my case, please. Is that possible?"

"Yes, certainly. Doctor Holberg will be in his office, up on the floor where you were. Doctor Castell is probably in the wards right now, but I'll have him drop into Doctor Holberg's office for you. You can go right up."

He took the elevator again, stepping out into the familiar corridor, and found the senior physician's office.

HE stopped in front of the door. What was he going to say?

"Doctor, are you sure I wasn't suffering from concussion and severe facial lacerations when I was brought in here? You're positive this is just a routine checkup following a minor accident?"

"You're quite certain? Could

you definitely state I haven't been here for two or three months?"

"Yes, Doctor, I know the accident was only a week ago."

"By the way, Doctor Castell, what kind of accident was it? Didn't you have to pull me out of a completely wrecked car? Are you firm in your belief that when you first examined me at the scene of the accident, I did not have at least a broken arm and possible internal injuries in addition to the facial cuts I've already mentioned?"

And what would happen to him after he asked those questions? To what asylum will I be untimely ship't?

And yet he had to know why he had those broken memories of injuries that had never been, that vanished as he became urgently aware of them. He could not spend the rest of his life in wondering. Sleep no more, he thought. Thy mind hath murdered sleep.

He knocked on the door.

"Come in," Doctor Holberg called.

Delman stepped into the physician's office. Holberg and a younger doctor who must have been Castell, the intern, looked at him blankly.

"Yes, what can I do for you, sir?" The familiar baritone was polite, ready to help, and completely and unmistakably lacking in recognition.

Delman stared back at the two men, feeling his breath turn shallow with panic.

He was driving his car up the secondary road that fed into the highway and he stopped to let another car speed by, then turned into the whiteness of concrete and drove across the road, parking on the shoulder. He looked around at the slowly waving roadside weeds, his head turning gradually. He took a cigarette out of his breast pocket and lit it, the smoke drifting out of his mouth and eddying through the open window beside him.

After a while, he started the car again and drove away, turning off his route to pass through the town where the hospital was, driving by the sprawled white building, and then back out onto the highway and into New York without stopping, without thought, as though an automaton sat behind the unbroken wheel of the undamaged car.

II

IN the long twilight of early summer, the doorsteps of West Twentieth Street were crowded. The quiet lights of the Episcopal Seminary in Chelsea Square began to show a deeper yellow. The old brick walls echoed with the shrillness of children around the parked cars.

Delman stood at his window and watched.

This was New York, more surely than that gray megalopolis that had filled the skyline to his left as his car had swung down the ramp into the New Jersey entrance of the Lincoln Tunnel. Here the blended mass was broken into its component structures—the old dwellings beside the warehouses and garages, the boarded fronts of the condemned buildings on Tenth Avenue, and the towering orange-colored cliffs of London Terrace. This house in which he lived had been built in the 1850s, and there were others even older on this same block.

After the initial unfamiliarity has passed, a man does not think of his everyday surroundings as being more than a simple environment in which he functions. Nevertheless, here where the city's progress had pinched off a pocket of brownstone and even older brick, where tar covered only the narrow line of former trolley tracks on Ninth Avenue and left cobblestones to either side, Delman had found the measuring stick of time marked off in increments of history.

Had he? Was there such a thing as time—or space—or history?

He stood at the window, watching the shadows deepen, listening to the soft murmur of Spanish from the front steps.

In the two days since his return to New York, he had lived in a sort of stasis, his emotions and reflexes wrapped in shock reaction. *Sleep no more*, he had thought to himself as he stood, or believed he stood, outside the doctor's office in the hospital. He remembered that now, and his lips twisted.

Two days before, he had unlocked his apartment and, exhausted, thrown himself on the bed, pushing his shoes off with his toes. He had slept dreamlessly—or so he believed—waking in the morning with his muscles stiff and his eyes drawn with the pain of a headache. Getting up, he had gone to the bathroom, found an aspirin, and swallowed it, his mouth puckering at the taste, and then he went back to bed, there to lie between waking and sleeping, his mind blank, until night fell and he slept again.

A larger window across the street opened into the seminary's library. From where he stood, Delman could see the converging stacks of books, filled with the records that men left as they struggled from birth to death on the face of their world.

But if time and space were nonexistent, if history was open to suspicion, if memory itself was suspect, then, in the final analysis, was there really a world?

THE date was May fifth. In five days, would a Frederick Delman be discharged from Newcomb Hospital in New Jersey? No—because two days ago, he had stopped at the crossroads and waited for the car to go by. But if there had been a May third on which the car had hit him, was there one Frederick Delman in Newcomb Hospital with his arm in a cast and his head mercifully wrapped in bandages, and another, somehow in that same room, whose fractured skull was healing with almost impossible rapidity, and who did not have a broken arm at all? And another who was merely under routine observation? Was there, perhaps—the fear bit deep—one on a coroner's slab?

No, for if that yet other Frederick Delman, the one who had been—or, rather, would be—discharged after routine observation following a minor accident, did not exist . . . did he exist?

It was too complicated. There were simpler alternatives. Either there was one Frederick Delman—himself—caught up in some incredible series of altered time and events, or else, even simpler, there was one Frederick Delman—himself—who was insane.

Was he? He turned away from the window. People never really thought themselves insane, no matter how many surface fears and "proofs" some masochistic quirk

might conjure up. What genuine test of sanity could an individual apply to himself?

He remembered a night on the starlighted porch of his father's house in Florida. He had looked out over the rough, shadowy surface of the close-cropped lawn to the liquid metal of the inland waterway beyond, and focused his look on formless darkness.

His father had stirred in the metal chair behind him, scraping the runners across the terrazzo of the floor.

"Thinking, son?" The remembered quiet voice called up the image of the blocky, blunt-featured face, the serene eyes under their thick salt-and-pepper brows.

"Something like that," Fred Delman answered, his arms around the faded blue denim over his drawn-up knees.

"What about?"

HE had been silent for a few minutes. A chartered excursion boat went up the waterway, heralded by dance music, the running lights and deck-lamps moving smoothly by.

"People, Dad. Sometimes they bother me."

"In what way, Fred?"

"Well, they're all so much alike. You can split them off into a handful of types—fat ones, thin ones, short ones, tall ones, light, dark, slow, fast—but, even then,

there's a general similarity. Oh, one of them fools around with cartooning, maybe, and the next one plays the piano. One's a good roller skater, and another one's nuts for sports cars, but by and large they're all the same.

"There's even more to it than that. They all react to the same things in the same way. They've got fixed ideas of what's proper and what isn't—I don't mean 'proper' like 'good' instead of 'bad.' I mean—well, it's like that old business about things 'just not being done.' It's—well, it's almost as if people lived by a set of rules. Pretty strict rules that they don't violate because it never occurs to them that there is some other possible way to act."

"Something like the distinction between classic and flat?"

"Well, yes, though it goes deeper than that, of course. What makes a whole group of people in contact with something they've never seen or heard of before suddenly yell, 'Hey, *that's* classic!?' Or what makes them simultaneously decide it's flat, and not worth touching with a boathook?"

"It's not as if they were like that by conscious agreement, either. It's more like an instinct of some kind. It's as if—I don't know, as if the whole world had a limited imagination."

"Um. Reach any conclusions?"

"Some. Not very many. For a

while there, I was convinced there had to be something wrong with me. I used to worry about not being able to automatically know the right course of action, or the proper behavior-response." He stopped, and sat silently for a moment. "Oh, let's not kid ourselves, it still bothers me. But I'll be damned if I'm going to push around through life feeling like an extra in a crowd shot!"

His father chuckled in the dark.

"That's phrased better than it was when I said it."

THE relaxed voice had grown warmer, and yet more cautious as his father picked his words carefully.

"Fred, I'm leaving you this one to figure out for yourself. I think you're right—most people are generally alike. But as to why they're that way, and whether that's a good way to be or not, that's something everybody figures out for themselves. Just remember, there're a lot of theories and special beliefs built around the idea that if most people are similar, and a small percentage aren't, then the small percentage is somehow superior. On a small scale—well, you know about the guys who think they're Napoleon.

"A psychiatrist would probably boil me in oil for making those last remarks to you. You've got head enough to realize that 'was

just the Old Man waving a horrible example at you for his own sweet conscience's sake."

His father slapped him on the shoulder. "Okay, lad. Now go out and be a genius. See if I care. But watch out for the wild ideas."

Remembering now, Frederick Delman could feel his skin tingle with the creeping flush of fear. Had that been the beginning? Somewhere in the hidden convolutions of his subconscious mind, had he seized on the undeniable truism that members of the same species tend to resemble a general average, and compounded this with an urgent need to find some explanation?

Had there been a slow accretion, somewhere, of little "evidences"? Had a trigger been set in his mind, gleaming and recording chance resemblances of mannerism here, of facial structure there, tracking group habit-patterns and finding correlations that actually existed only in the laws of randomness? Had the whole sand-founded edifice been raised as a coral atoll rises—a heap of insignificant particles that nevertheless piled relentlessly atop one another until the entire structure, long a steadily increasing shoal beneath the stillness of a nominally placid mind, suddenly had broken through and found the surface?

Had he, then, in observing chance phenomena, in trying with

all the emotionally loaded drives of adolescence to find himself, in bending over backward to avoid megalomania, come upon a special madness of his own?

Yet, because no man ever really thinks himself insane, he picked up his telephone irresolutely, and spoke only hesitantly to a former university roommate who was now a consulting psychologist.

III

ROGER Bates leaned forward in his high chair and polished his horn-rimmed glasses on the end of his tie.

Delman watched the action carefully, trying to find in it some indication of his friend's opinion, but Bates maintained an expression of single-minded concentration on his square, heavy face.

"Well, what do you think?" Delman was forced to ask.

"I don't know, exactly," Bates said, the glasses again distorting his eyes. "Look," he went on, "we've been buddies for a long time. If you were somebody I'd never met before . . ." He let it trail off, his usually precise inflections wavering a little.

"So I'm nuts," Delman said.

"Maybe you are." The psychologist's eyes fastened on Delman. "I'll grant you the possibility. But if you think I'm going to psychoanalyze you, you've come to

the wrong store. I've got colleagues who handle that end of the enterprise. But you're a pretty smart hoy. Let me tell you a few things and see what you think. Okay?"

"Sure."

Bates relaxed, his stubby fingers interlaced. "You took your philosophy courses right alongside of me. We both know about Bishop Berkeley and seeing through a glass darkly. Fine. Now think back. Was college the first time you encountered the idea that things did not exist, as such, except in your awareness of them? When you were a kid—before you came up against many other kids your age—wasn't it one of your natural assumptions that you were the center of the Universe? If people came into the house carrying boxes, weren't those obviously presents for you? Who else was there, and what else came in boxes, to your way of thinking?

"Take my kid sister. I remember her talking about the 'dolls' in the railroad cars that went by our window. They were really people, right enough, but to her they were dolls—because she, naturally, was *the* consciousness of which she was aware. Everything else was a prop."

Delman nodded. "It's the way people are organized that's responsible. The mere symbolism inherent in being able to see other individuals, while you remain

largely invisible to yourself unless you happen to look in a mirror, leads to that. Again, you're aware of your own thoughts, but what proof do you really have that *anyone* else is a discrete intelligence? We're a non-telepathic race, so naturally we have no proof."

BATES held up his hand, thumb and forefinger touching. "Bingo! Plus the fact that most people are so basically insecure that they've got to walk around with the unconscious conviction that, at bottom, nobody's as smart as they are. Berkeley's idea was a refinement of that, in a sense. The idea that matter does not exist, except as you become consciously aware of it—hell, you know the old line, 'Does this table exist after everybody has left the room?'

"Actually, we can be pretty sure that what Berkeley really meant, in his heart of hearts, was: 'Does it exist after *I* leave the room?' Now, this is one symptom of a recognized form of psychosis. How well controlled it was, I have no interest in finding out. The fact remains that a classifiable psychotic not only made a considerable contribution to the progress of human thought, but got along well enough in his society not to come to an untidy end. Admittedly, it was a slightly less discriminating society than the one



we're used to, but not prohibitively so."

"All of which means?" Delman asked, his glance razor-sharp at the psychologist's facial expressions.

Bates gestured impatiently. "I'll come back to that. It's one thread of what I'm trying to say. Hang onto it.

"Okay, now let's consider your problem. You're involved in a further refinement of the original childhood conviction. You've got Shakespeare Disease—all the world's a stage. You're convinced that we're all characters in a play, and that, for some reason, your part's been rewritten several times."

"Hold it!" Delman interjected. "I'm 'convinced' of nothing like it. I've merely reasoned it down to a point where it's either that or I'm psycho. Your job is telling me which it is."

Bates grinned sardonically. "I could tell you from now till doomsday—to the day you died, in other words—that you were loopier than my Cousin Joe who thinks he's a radish, and you'd never be convinced. Not you. There's a difference between the part that talks, and listens, and sees, and the part that's *you*.

"Straight? All right, if you *are* bats, then there's no sense carrying on this discussion. If you're not, then we've got to work on the premise that all the world is

a stage. That's our angle of attack, with modifications."

ROGER Bates leaned back, and put his eyes in shadow. Delman ran his palms over his knees.

"Modifications being such—" Bates continued, then paused, and finally said, "The central stage isn't where you think it is. All the world's a stage, all right, but it's not a macrocosmic amphitheater—at least, not as far as it concerns you, it isn't. But each of us has a theater inside his head and this is where we actually act out our lives. To each of us, our life is a drama, with ourselves as the central character. We write our lines, construct our sets, and give our own direction. A man can gather information from the outside—from the macrocosmic world—but what he reacts to is the drama inside, and the drama inside depends strictly on what his subconscious *permits* it to be.

"Let me make that clearer. The macrocosmic world is full of color—but for a color-blind mind, the drama inside is panchromatic black-and-white; to the deaf man, it's pantomime; to the blind, it's recitation; and no matter how a man may intellectualize the greater drama, it's by the drama inside that he lives. To the extent that his perception of the macrocosmic world is limited, his own personal drama is unfaithful to actuality."

Bates stopped. "Got a cigarette?" he asked.

Delman offered him one silently. The psychologist lit it and took a few deep puffs.

"Now. This is true in other senses than that of mere physical handicaps. The color-blind man may have no conception of the color green, but he can be pretty sure it exists. He may have a shred of doubt in the back of his mind, yet it never emerges enough to keep him from fitting into his environment.

"The psychotic, on the other hand, may have a subconscious which supplies false data indicating that he is being persecuted. In this case, the drama inside reflects a world so far removed from actuality that the phrase 'living in a world of his own' becomes dead-ly accurate. But he has no way of checking that, for the drama inside, no matter how much of a fantasy it may be, always remains logical within itself. Moreover, if he is presented with data—by a well-meaning relative, say, who tells him, 'Now look, Joe, nobody's after you; be reasonable,' why, then his subconscious doesn't *permit* that data to really sink in and influence the drama inside.

"What Joe hears, after the message has been filtered through all the little censors that ride him, is 'Be reasonable,' which is ridiculous on the face of it, because

he is reasonable, and the rest of the message is a blarney something that not only doesn't sound applicable to the case, but seems to have been delivered with ulterior motives in mind. The result may be that Joe flies into a defensive rage and plants a bread-knife in the relative."

BATES stopped again to pull a handkerchief out of his pocket, and Delman realized that the man had been mopping his brow periodically.

"As you know," Bates went on, "most people are egotists. They employ various degrees of outward repression, but with the drama inside set up the way it is, a man can't help but feel that he is more important than anyone else with whom he's in contact. That's normal, however.

"Now let's say there are various operative factors. A need to establish a strong individuality, say. The drama inside plays up the central character even more. This feeds back into the subconscious, which begins making its data selections and censorships even more strongly slanted toward maintaining that individuality. The central character gets even more buildup, this feeds back again, and you've got a cycle.

"At this point, *real* confusion sets in. The guy with the cycle loses the distinction between the

drama *inside* and the one *outside*, and does all his thinking and acting in accordance.

"Berkeley might have had one of those. He might have repressed it something awful—he must have—but trying to fight an emotional response with an intellectualization only leads to an emotional rationalization. The result was 'Does this chair exist after everyone is out of the room?' meaning 'Does the *room* exist?' meaning 'Does *anything* exist?' 'Is there anything at all—without me?'"

"This is Berkeley, not me, huh?" Delman asked bitterly. "Thanks, Rog. I think I know how tough it must have been for you." He sat motionless in the chair, staring ahead of him.

Bates looked at him uncomfortably. "No, I don't mean that. You're not following the Berkeley pattern. You just think you're an actor—not *the* central actor."

"Sorry, Rog," Delman said quietly. "That was before you showed me the flaw in my logic—sane or otherwise. You're right, in a sense. I couldn't be a supporting player. If the structure's to stand up at all, I've got to be the director, as well. It even fits. Every time I got in trouble, my subconscious altered previous fact to get me out of it."

He stood up and tapped the back of his skull with his fingers. "In here, there's a mechanism—

or my drama inside says there's a mechanism—which subconsciously runs this entire world."

He laughed. "You told me yourself. You showed me, explaining everything step by step. I can't trust the data that's fed to my drama inside. This, of course, means that *all* observational data is open to suspicion. *All* includes the world, its people—even you, Rog. Everything, in short, except my consciousness of myself."

HE stopped, strode across the room, and stood over Bates. "Well, what sanatorium have you got picked out? Try to make it one without too many other cases like mine, will you? I never cared for that poem about six men who were God."

Bates shook his head. "Come out of it, Fred. You've got a bug, but you're not batty. You've got a tendency—we've all got a million tendencies toward all kinds of things. Now stop glorying in your so-called troubles and sit down. What kind of a jackass do you think I am? Why do you think I gave you that Berkeley background?"

Delman fell back as Bates rose out of his chair.

"Sit down, damn it! I used to paste you regularly in school, and I can still do it!"

Blank-eyed, Delman sat down.

"Berkeley had psycho-tenden-

cies, right? *Tendencies!* He didn't wind up in an asylum and neither will you. You took a nasty rap on the head. It doesn't matter whether it was an actual, physical blow, or whether it was something else that hit hard enough to make you picture it that way. You came out of some nasty shock and funny things began happening. If it was a physical blow, the effects'll gradually disappear. If it wasn't, you'll find out what *did* happen and you'll straighten out. Tendencies get handled every day — there are dozens of adjustments that can be made. Berkeley died in harness, and so will you, someday. There's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be a useful, functioning member of society for the rest of your life—"

Bates stopped short. He had been drawn up. Now his posture slumped, and he stared speechlessly at Delman for a minute before he spoke. His voice was low, incredulous.

"I've just realized. I've known you for fifteen years . . . Fred, what do you do for a living?"

Delman looked back at him. "I don't know."

He knocked on the apartment door and Bates opened it.

"Fred! You old son of a gun!" the psychologist exclaimed. "What're you doing back in town?"

"Just passing through, Rog," Delman replied, his ears roaring.

"What's today's date?"

"August fourth. But what—"

Delman forced casualness into his voice. "I'm on my way to a place called Newcomb, I think. Can I use your phone?"

"SPIN me again, joe. I don't read you," the desk sergeant said at the other end of the telephone.

"My name is Frederick Delman," he repeated. "I was a patient in your local hospital following a serious automobile accident on May third."

"Any property found at the scene of an accident is usually held at the hospital," the policeman said boredly. "If it wasn't there and was found at all, we *might* have it, hut the Property Clerk's office won't be open until—"

"I didn't lose anything." Delman broke in. *Except a little sanity, maybe.* "If you check your records, I think you'll find that someone was killed in front of the hospital—or somewhere near there, perhaps."

"When?" the policeman asked sharply, losing his routine tone.

"Uh—July tenth or eleventh. Make it the tenth for sure." *Why not? One date's as good as the next.*

"Man or woman?"

Delman made a mental choice. "Woman."

"What'd she look like?"

Delman frowned. His eyes searched the apartment, landed on a story illustration in the open magazine beside Bates's chair. He craned his neck for a clearer angle.

"About . . . um, let's see . . ." He subtracted eight inches from his own height. "Five three, I'd say. Young—middle twenties, maybe, no more. Green eyes—" he stretched for a closer look—"dark hair with red highlights."

"What was her name?"

Delman hesitated, then decided. "I don't know. I didn't talk to her."

"Look, mister"—the policeman's voice was cautious—"what do you know about this girl?"

"As far as I can tell," Delman said, taking a deep breath, "I must have regained consciousness that night and wandered out of the hospital. I saw her coming down the street and killed her."

"Where are you?"

"Did it happen?"

"Yes, it happened. We found her. Why'd you do it? *Where are you?*"

Delman smiled—a weak, thin brother to a bitter grimace. "All right, that's what I wanted to know. I'm coming in to give myself up."

HE hung up the telephone quietly and turned to face Roger Bates, who was standing in

the middle of the room and staring at him.

"I did it," Delman murmured, his own expression almost as incredulous. "I didn't really think I could."

"What do you mean, 'you did it'?" Bates demanded blankly.

"I created an event. I dreamed up a completely imaginary incident, made sure that it was important enough to require all kinds of corroboration—and it exists. It can be proven that it happened. *I did it, Rog!*"

"What?"

Delman fixed Bates with his somber but triumphant eyes. "I could change you, I imagine. Give you another name, another past. Make you taller or shorter, thinner or fatter. I could change the color of your hair, alter your eyes, toy with your personality. Or, if I chose, you would never have existed at all."

Bates's manner became casual and relaxed. "You're probably right," he said. "If you can make something that never happened come true, it wouldn't be any trouble at all to remold me."

He half-turned and waved at a chair. "Why don't you sit down? I'd like to have you clarify all this for me."

Delman smiled at him satirically. "Sure. Why not?" He sat down and watched the psychologist take the chair opposite him.

His eyes gleamed with suppressed amusement. "Where should I begin?" he asked.

"Oh, anywhere," Bates said casually. "How about this automobile accident? Did you create that, too?"

Delman frowned, then shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I imagine we've simply gone back to the pattern in which the most serious accident happened."

"I don't understand."

"I know."

"But you were in an automobile accident? A serious one?"

"Yes. On May third, as you might remember. I was in Newcomb Hospital for . . . some time. I couldn't exactly say how long, because that pattern didn't run long enough, last time, for me to be discharged."

BATES shook his head with frustration. "You're not making yourself very clear."

"I know. Cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

A smile that wanted to be smug tugged at Delman's mouth. "You *did* take my last cigarette, didn't you? I remember being slightly annoyed."

He tore the top off a package from his shirt pocket and lit one of the cigarettes, watching the smoke drift, an expression of pleased surprise on his face.

"*That's convenient,*" he said,

speaking softly again. "I don't suppose you'd accept the fact that it was May fifth half an hour ago," he went on more distinctly. "Or that you had just spent an hour convincing me I wasn't crazy—er—not exactly, that is."

"By the way," he said suddenly, "what do I do for a living?"

Bates was sitting carefully on the edge of his chair, his body tensed. "You're an insurance claims investigator, of course."

"Took care of that, too, eh?" Delman chuckled. He got to his feet and sighed. "I don't really see how I could convince you of the truth, Rog. But I do have the Newcomb police convinced I'm a murderer—and they can probably prove it. I'm frankly curious to see how. It'll be interesting to find out just how thorough my subconscious is. Come along if you want to, Roger."

Bates stood up. "I will," he said tautly.

Delman chuckled again. "I thought you would. Well, I hope you enjoy the proceedings—though, of course, they'll cease to have existed once I've found out what I wanted to know."

He waited for Bates to get his coat.

"Listen, Fred," the psychologist said as he turned away from the hall closet, "will you admit the possibility that you might actually have committed this murder,

and that this is your subconscious way of punishing yourself for your guilt?"

Delman looked at him for a moment. Then his eyes crinkled, and the corners of his mouth rose. He began to laugh—easy, rolling sounds that chuckled up from deep in his throat.

"Still following the trade, Rog? Sure, I'll admit it. I'll admit anything. I can afford to."

He stopped the laughter and looked at Bates seriously.

"Rog," he asked, "don't you ever feel that you've just gotten a rush call from Central Casting?"

IV

A FULL moon hung over the road. Stretches of forest were dark horizontal swatches of crosshatching ahead of him. The top of the car had been folded back, and the wind curled over the hood, spun up from the windshield and drove down into the back seat, eddying forward and whipping past his bare head.

As he drove, the tires of his car singing over the highway, Delman felt his first exuberance fading, and becoming a quieter and more truly tangible confidence. The days of doubt and indecision had come to an end, and the tangled and tangling structure of seeming impossibilities and insanities had come unraveled, weav-

ing itself into a pattern of simple logic.

Simple once you've unraveled it, yes, he thought. But it had not been until this last time when the consistency of the world pattern had been threatened by Bates's sudden realization, when he had suddenly found himself outside the psychologist's apartment, the incipient breach in reality mended, that he had finally understood the nature of "reality" and of his true function.

He turned his head and glanced at Bates, who was looking straight ahead. He had not spoken since they left his apartment.

Delman could not disguise the smile that had wanted to be smug. The thoughts running through the psychologist's mind must be complicated and disquieting. In every man, no matter how much he has studied the labyrinths of other minds, there is always a small voice that asks worriedly, "Suppose I am crazy?"

Delman had heard it often. It was not a voice that carried conviction, but it was persistent and inescapable. Only now that he no longer heard it himself could he appreciate the depths to which the edge of that thin, untiring voice could cut.

The car rolled out of the complicated turnings of a traffic circle and turned east.

"Newcomb, about three miles

up," Delman said.

Bates nodded, preoccupied.

THE murdered girl's name was Troy Christian. Delman looked down at her photograph and was astonished and pleased at the faithful duplication of every feature he had seen in the magazine illustration.

"Artists' model," the district attorney grunted. "You sure you never saw her before?"

Delman nodded quietly. "Positive. I didn't even remember her too well when I called in."

"I can't understand it," Fisher, the DA, said. "Why'd you pick her? Why'd you want to kill anybody?"

"She was there. I wandered out of the hospital and she was coming down the street. The next thing I know, I had strangled her. I don't know why. I didn't even start to remember it until a few days ago." He looked up with a bewildered expression on his face. "It just happened, that's all. I keep remembering parts of it—like yesterday's nightmare."

Careful, boy, he thought. *Don't spread it too thick*. And a tendrill of mingled fear and surprise at his abilities as an actor touched him, for it almost seemed as if the disjointed, incoherent memories were there.

Fisher shrugged. He looked at Bates, who was standing beside

Delman. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Off the record?"

"It'll have to be. I know your reputation, but your testimony won't be admissible—you're a friend of the defendant."

"I think it's entirely possible, then," Bates said. "I'm pretty well acquainted with his past history. It could have happened this way. *Completely* off the record, I think it's the only way it could have happened. He's never been in this town and I'm positive he never knew the girl before. It was just a case of simple strangulation, too, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Fisher grunted drily. "You don't mind if I sort of reserve judgment." He picked up the photograph, studied it for a minute, then dropped it. "Shame. Damn pretty girl."

"The kind you dream about," Delman said.

Bates glanced at him from the corners of his eyes, but didn't say anything.

"All right," Fisher said. "It'll have to go to trial. You going to plead insanity?"

Delman lifted his shoulders. "I haven't got a lawyer yet. Whatever he'd advise, I'll do. I know that crash scrambled me up pretty thoroughly. It must have."

Bates opened his mouth to say something. Delman looked at him, and the psychologist relapsed into

a thoughtful silence.

"Every punk holdup artist with an itchy trigger finger tries to pull that insanity plea," Fisher said bluntly. He grimaced disgustedly. "Their environment warped them, or they're repressed, or this, or that. Nobody's a genuine criminal any more."

"Nobody is," Bates agreed quietly, "or ever was."

FISHER spat into his wastebasket. He swung on Delman. "That's what I mean. Well, if you can actually prove it, go ahead and try. But whatever defense your lawyer puts up, I'm going to try and knock it down with everything I've got. That's my job."

He looked at Delman uncertainly. "I don't get it. You saved us a lot of trouble by turning yourself in. We were ready to write it off as an unsolved case. I just don't see your percentage."

"I've got a conscience," Delman said.

"Everybody does. Only everybody hasn't got the same kind." Fisher leaned forward, putting his hands flat on the top of his desk. "I'm going to ask the Grand Jury for a murder indictment. It'll be up to your lawyer to prove there wasn't any premeditation. If he can't, that's the charge you'll go to trial on. One way or the other, it won't be a long affair. We've got your confession—that always

helps a lot, even if it's not supposed to, legally. We'll be able to support the confession with proof fairly easily. It'll be up to the Grand Jury to decide whether it's murder or manslaughter. At the trial, it'll be up to your lawyer to prove insanity in either case, if he wants to."

Fisher scowled and shook his head. "I'll tell you right now, I'm not a damn bit happy. It's falling together too easily. I'm willing to go along with you. If you're on the level, I appreciate your making it so simple—and I've got to admit I sympathize with what you must be going through. It's no picnic for a man to believe he might be mentally unbalanced."

He clenched his fist and held it out at Delman. "But if you're trying to use this as a trick to wind up with a comparatively easy sentence, I'll come down on you like an avalanche, and you'll burn. I'm warning you."

"I know," Delman said, feeling a little bubbling wellspring of irony trickling somewhere inside of him. "Rog thinks I'm slightly off my rails, aside from being amnesiac. I don't know what to think. That's why I'm doing things this way. Believe me, I'm just as interested in whatever facts you can dig up as you are."

But it was not until he had been taken to a cell and left alone that the full flavor of the

situation struck him.

"*Nor iron bars a cage,*" he quoted softly to himself, and ran his finger lightly along one of the vertical steel rods that formed part of the enclosing framework.

If he chose, he could jump back into another world-pattern, in which no "murder" had been committed—or, if he preferred subtler methods, he had only to change the bars to glass, or halsb wood, or even sealing wax—or velvet ropes, and conjure a pair of shears out of the air.

V

DELMAN'S confidence did not waver during the Grand Jury hearing. He sat almost motionless at a table between his lawyer and Roger Bates, watching and listening as Fisher delivered his presentations and made his points with mechanical precision.

When Fisher clearly established the fact that Troy Christian had lived in Newcomb for eighteen years, after moving there from another town with her parents at the age of six, and then went on to introduce witnesses who had known the girl, Delman assumed the proper expression of bewildered remorse.

When it was further proven that he had killed her, he merely nodded. That was no more than he had already admitted in his con-

fession. He watched with veiled amusement and open interest while his lawyer—a nervous, stocky young man who was obviously just becoming accustomed to horn-rimmed glasses—made a brief attempt to establish that the proper charge was manslaughter, since Delman had been delirious at the time of the killing.

Delman's lawyer returned to his table and Fisher got up slowly. Until now, as the hearing progressed in a routine manner, the man had been handling the job as though he were merely laying a sub-structure of fact. Now he recalled a previous witness with the same disgusted vindictiveness he had shown on that first night when Delman had turned himself in and made his suspicious confession.

Delman's lawyer widened his eyes warily. He could smell something coming. He turned his head and nervously whispered, "He's going to pull a stunt of some kind."

Serene in his power, Delman smiled and shrugged. "Let him," he said quietly, and continued to watch.

His expression did not change when the witness testified that, in addition to being an old friend of Troy Christian's, he was also personally acquainted with Frederick Delman.

Delman heard Bates sigh and

caught his lawyer's sudden start out of the corner of his eye.

"Personally acquainted?" Fisher asked the witness. "Would you mind giving the circumstances of that acquaintance?" He turned around, knowing what the answer would be, and fastened his glance on Delman, for the reaction.

The witness said: "Well, I rent out the apartment over my garage. Mr. Delman there, he was living in it for about six months, right up to last May. Miss Troy recommended him to me and he looked like a nice enough young fellow—"

"That's all, Mr. Harris," Fisher cut in triumphantly.

"That is all!" Delman's lawyer stared indignantly at his client. "There goes any hope of proving the killing wasn't premeditated. Why didn't you tell me this?"

"He didn't remember it," Bates said quickly, talking to the lawyer past Delman.

The spectators were talking excitedly. Fisher continued to hold his position beside the witness stand, his mouth harsh.

Delman did not change his expression. It was, however, mildly startling to contemplate the lengths of detail into which his subconscious visualization of a world reality-pattern could go.

ROGER BATES sat across the badly varnished table from Delman. They waited until the

guard had moved away out of earshot.

Delman smiled slightly at the psychologist's expression. "Well?"

"You've been indicted for first-degree murder," Bates said.

Delman shrugged. "I'm aware of it. The story is that I knew her before—they've proven that pretty conclusively, I think. Obviously, something happened that gave me a motive to murder her, and this confession of mine was a clumsy attempt to get off with a light sentence. Fisher's convinced that the whole amnesia business is a blind."

Bates shook his head in puzzlement. "There's a lot about this I can't understand. You turned up at my apartment in New York, picked up a phone, confessed to a murder, and drove down here almost immediately, after telling me you'd somehow created the whole incident.

"All right, I can understand that much of it. Understand it because I've seen a few things like it, that is. If I testified, I'd have said it is my professional opinion that you're the victim of a trauma.

"But this part about your having known the girl before, the complete lack of logic in your actions, everything—" He dropped the sentence, bewildered. "I can't even see where it makes sense from your point of view. And

that's unusual. You're muddying the track at every turn. You're not reacting right, you're lying your head off, you're—" He stopped again and slapped his fist against the table. "Why?"

Delman, at the moment, could not stop to sympathize with the baffled psychologist.

"So I'm not reacting according to textbook rules, am I?" he said angrily. "And you can't understand that? Why should you, if you're going to persist in thinking that I'm really insane?"

HE caught himself, remembering that it didn't really matter whether Bates understood or not, but he was nevertheless struck with the perverse desire to explain the situation to somebody.

"Look, accept for a moment that I might not be insane, that I am the entity that maintains this entire world in its—to me—flexible reality. If that were true and I had just become aware of the fact, I'd go into this thing for two very good reasons. First, I'd want to see if I could create an incident out of whole cloth.

"And I did. I picked one that was ideally suited to my second purpose—which was to get all kinds of documentation and evidence, so I could really find out how thorough the creation was. There are footprints, fingerprints, witnesses—even a scar on the side of my neck

that was never there before, and preserved skin scrapings from under the girl's nails that match my skin.

"Doesn't it even strike you as slightly incredible that I wasn't caught almost immediately?"

Bates shook his head with angry frustration. "Listen, Fred, doesn't it get through to you at all? The witnesses—that cabbie who saw you staggering back into the hospital, Castell, the intern who noticed the scratch on your neck—all that evidence you've just mentioned? It convinced a jury. Doesn't it even touch you?"

"Touch me? You bet it does! It proves my point. And I notice how neatly you've ignored my remark about being caught."

"I don't think it's relevant. The fact is that somehow you weren't. These things happen."

"Why?" Delman's question cracked out, as though he had been holding it in reserve for a long time, waiting to use it as he used it now, with a strike like a leaping arrow's.

"Coincidence. Human error. Any number of things."

"Very good, Rog. Very good indeed," Delman said sarcastically. "It's always good to use coincidence as one of the main props in a logical argument."

"I should have known better," Bates said resignedly, his shoulders slumping. "My hands are tied by a

dozen different things. You're a friend of mine, for one thing. That's an emotional factor. It's not as if you were a case I'd been called in on, that I'd never seen before and would probably never see again. I can't testify at the trial, on those grounds."

BATES bit his lower lip. "I hate what's going on here," he continued violently. "As a friend of yours, as a psychologist who recognizes the necessity for having you institutionalized and treated, instead of convicted and executed as you're going to be, this whole thing strikes me as the most tragic kind of farce. I've tried talking to Fisher, but I was through before I started. He's an honest man and he's proved to his own satisfaction that you deserve to die. As far as he's concerned, he's right, of course.

"So I'm going to read about you in the papers. I'll never understand you. I'll be indignant and, at the same time, I'll be almost glad of your death—because, God help me, I'm no longer even convinced that this whole thing wasn't staged for some obscure purpose that has backfired on you. And if I do learn at the trial that you *are* guilty—guilty in your own mind, as well as in the legal sense—then I'll be sorry I ever knew you."

He got up, pushing his chair back with its legs flat on the

chipped cement of the floor.

"They ought to rip my diploma off the wall for talking to you like this," he said bitterly. "I ought to do it myself for getting involved this deeply. I put in fifteen years of study so I could stand here and betray everything I ever learned."

He turned and walked away.

"Rog!"

He turned around. Delman looked at him, his face pale.

"Rog, I'm sorry. I know it's not going to help, but it'll all be gone after the trial. It won't ever have happened." The note of pleading in his voice surprised him. "Try to think of that. It won't ever have happened. The auto accident, the girl, the trial, this—none of it, Rog. Right after the trial."

He said it, but he couldn't actually believe in the urgency of the explanation, for the knowledge remained in the back of his mind that this was like a play, or a movie, and that the deep identification with the characters and their problem would be over as soon as he left the theater and stood blinking in the sun once more.

But Bates only swung his hand in desperate impatience and walked out of the room.

DELMAN turned around, away from the judge. He faced the courtroom. The verdict had been

delivered and sentence pronounced. He was remanded to State Prison, there to stay until sentence of death could be imposed. The trial was over. But the spectators had not moved. Were they waiting for some sort of outburst, some outrageous action on his part?

The crowd was composed of the usual ingredients. The morbid, the indignant, the idle. Relatives of the jury. A reporter or two—the case was too dead for effective revival and the almost dull nature of the trial, with its foregone conclusion, had peeled away the men from the Philadelphia and Camden newspapers.

As always, Delman was struck by the underlying uniformity of the crowd. Here was a face whose like he had seen in Miami, another that belonged in New York. It was a cast drawn from the severely limited types available. Limited, he was convinced, not because he truly lacked imagination, but because there was simply no need for great variety.

Rog was there, too, of course. He had remained seated in the back row, his face impassive.

IT was over. Delman had learned the extent of his powers. The incident was established. There was first a body, then a search, then a confession, an indictment, a trial, and a judgment. All these

were recorded, a part of history. And he had created them on the spur of the moment, out of a bit of fact here, a magazine illustration there, sheer imagination most of all.

He smiled. An anticipatory ripple of sound went over the crowd.

It was September twenty-eighth. In another moment, it would be—oh, make it May third. Back to the highway, his car, and the crossroads.

Let his trip resume uninterrupted.

But it was still September twenty-eighth. He stayed where and when he was. Perspiration broke out of his forehead and he began to tremble.

His bloodless lips opened and closed.

It continued to be September. The crowd noises grew louder. The bailiff tugged at his arm. He broke the hold with an impatient jerk of his shoulder, but did not move.

Roger Bates had moved up to the front of the crowd, which was stirring, waiting for the dramatic reward of its anticipation. The psychologist, his own face haggard, locked his glance with Delman's.

"Rog!" The single frightened word reached out across the courtroom floor and found its answer hurried deeply in the pity of his friend's eyes.

THIS is the way a world ends, Delman thought, his hands dangling over his knees. *Not with a bang, or a whimper, but with a whisking away that leaves you breathless, gasping, grasping.*

The date was October fifth. He sat crushed on his bunk in the death cell. He had one month to live.

The last week might as well not have been lived at all. He knew there had been such a week, but it had passed like something that lopes in the night, darting through shadows. It had neither touched him nor been touched by him—it had merely been an interval, without true status as a segment of time.

Now it was night. The unshaded lights shone in the corridor on which his cell faced. Were he to get up, press his face against the bars and turn his head in either direction, he could see the corridor's length broken by the steel-toothed cell fronts. At each end of the corridor, nearer to his left than to his right, was a blank door. Above him was a cement ceiling; below him, a cement floor; around him, cement walls.

A month ago, these were glass, and balsa wood, and sealing wax. Velvet ropes.

He could not believe in the reality of his crime. He had not

done it. The whole thing was a conscious fabrication, from beginning to end, and with that conscious knowledge, how could he possibly have murdered that girl? Proof? Mountains of proof. But no memory of the things they purported to prove.

He could not understand what had happened. He had been a god—or almost a god. Time and space were flexible at his hand. He created matter and destroyed it.

Or so he had thought.

Was there another answer? Was he, perhaps, the tool of some deity, used to fulfill an unguessable purpose and now cast aside, to be broken, to die? He had thought that he had found the answer to the riddle of his confused memories. There, in Roger Bates's apartment, in his first conversation with the psychologist—the conversation of that other accident-free pattern—he had seen that it was inevitable that he, himself, was the author-director of the macrocosmic drama.

But he was not. If he had failed at the end of the trial, then from the very beginning, from that first May third of broken metal and agonized flesh, he had never been in command of himself. Never had he actually changed so much as the position of a blade of grass or the duration of a millimicrosecond of time.

And if there was not an in-

telligence capable of altering reality, if not himself, then, at least, wasn't there *someone*?

ALL the evidence presented at the trial was correct, then. He had moved to Newcomb, met Troy Christian, rented an apartment from her neighbor, had the accident, and, for some reason best known to himself, had met her in front of the hospital, killed her, gone back to his bed, and then, months later, had returned with his clumsy story and "confession" in a bungled attempt to escape his punishment.

But if *that* was true, then the conflicting memories of the accident were insanity, the memory of an apartment in New York was insanity, and the conversation with Roger Bates—the conversation around which all his present reasoning revolved—was also insanity, and had never happened.

And that was impossible. All his realities were impossible. He had a sense of being meshed in some complex framework whose intricacies he did not know. He reached out to break the framework apart, to find sense in senselessness.

He reached out—

His hands were clamped on the bars of his cell. "I didn't kill her!" he screamed, the shout echoing flatly down the steel and concrete corridor. "It never happened!"

"Shutcher goddam mouth!" somebody snarled from the next cell.

Once again, time passed in its disconnected manner. There were days like eye-blinks, in which night followed morning almost without pause, when it seemed that he fell asleep on his bunk with only a vague knowledge that a whole day must have passed, for he could remember his meals, even if he recalled nothing else, and there were other days when even that feeble proof was reduced to "I'm not hungry. I must have eaten, I suppose." There were other days that were interminable, days that seemed to encompass a lifetime of thought and wonder, days in which five seconds, counted out aloud, were long enough to let him pace the length of his cell twice over.

And though the days were seconds, or were months, the two weeks which they suddenly totaled flashed like a thunderclap, and were instantly there, whole and complete, though it seemed to him, when the end of the second week came, that it could not have come so soon, for the experience of two weeks of life was captured in a fractional second of memory.

He had almost reached the stage where simple surrender to the inevitable seemed far easier than any attempt at logical explanation—when Troy Christian was brought to his cell.





THE guard unlocked the door, let her in, turned the lock behind her, and walked silently away down the corridor. She stood motionless and unspeaking just inside the bars, looking at Delman with her compassionate face.

He shrank back against the far wall of his cell. Throughout the trial, no matter how real she might have been to the prosecutor and jury, no matter if a stone did mark her grave, or that her fingernail had supposedly torn his neck, he had never believed in her except as a name, an indistinct photograph, and the generalized brush strokes of a glanced-at magazine illustration.

And now he began to tremble as the first real hint of the full confusion of the situation became apparent. For there was only one possible answer—whether he had ever held his supposed power or not, there could be no doubt that Troy Christian did.

Abruptly, she crossed the cell and took him in her arms, her hands clasping the back of his head.

"Fred!" she sobbed beside his ear. "Oh, darling, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to have this happen."

He did not try to understand. He only held her tightly in response and realized with a part of his mind that his arms around her were familiar with the warm span of her back, that his face

had felt the touch of her hair before, that her voice was a thing he knew intimately, that there was nothing about this woman that was strange to him.

And, though he did not understand what was happening, it was as though he had reached out in darkness and bewilderment, and found shelter.

He sat down numbly on his bunk, listened to her speak as she sat pressed against him, her hand clasping his. Her eyes were still clouded with the tears that had sparkled in them, and her voice was warm and vibrant, but it was urgent, as well.

"Fred, we haven't time for explanations. With so many people convinced you're a murderer, we may be blocked at any moment. There'll be plenty of time afterward."

"I don't understand you," he said, bewildered. He could feel the familiar constriction of his muscles as his mind tried to follow a logical line of thought, failed, and manifested that failure in the painful tenseness of his body.

Her hand folded more tightly on his. "Don't try, Fred, please. You can't guess the explanation by yourself. Just understand this much: I can get you out of here. This whole situation can be cleared up, but you've got to help me. Trust me that far. If you're to

live, if—if all the things that were blocked by what's happened are to go back to normalcy, you've got to trust me for a little while."

VII

HE shook his head like a trapped animal that fails to understand its enclosure.

"I don't know," he said, the words an expression of his complete helplessness of spirit rather than of objection.

"Yes, Fred," she whispered. "It's more than I should ask. But I can't tell you now." Her voice was taking on more and more of the urgency that seemed to be pressing her harder with every passing second. "The accident—you've almost completely lost your memory. You know that, don't you?"

"I don't—" He broke off and rubbed his hand over his face, his head roaring. "I don't even know what I know any more."

Tears welled up momentarily in her eyes again. She brushed them away with an impatient motion of her hand. "It's my fault, Fred. You'll find that out." For a moment, her mouth trembled. "But you've got to forget about that for now. Forget about the accident, about the trial, about everything. I want you to know and believe only this—you've got to get out of this cell and you can get out of it."

"How?" he asked.

"Look at me, Fred." She reached out and held his shoulders. "You're not an ordinary human being. Don't question it, don't doubt it. Believe it. You have only to wish for something and it will happen the way you want it to. Never mind how or why. Just wish. Believe. You can get out. You *must* get out."

It was too much. He clamped his teeth together while he felt his mind tumbling into complete chaos. He broke away from her and buried his face in his trembling hands.

"I'm not anything," he mumbled through his fingers. "I never was. I thought I invented the murder. I thought I changed time and reality. I used to think I could reach out and twist things to suit myself. I thought I created you. But I didn't. I *did* kill you. Fisher proved it at the trial. And when I thought I could escape, nothing happened. I stood there and I *tried*. And nothing happened. And now I'm here."

He dropped his hands and jumped to his feet. He stood looking down at her, his eyes wide, but not really focused.

"You're not real. I killed you. You're dead. You can't be real. Because I'm not different from other people. I'm not anything."

He collapsed as though his tendons had been cut, and folded over into the bunk.

AFTER a while, he looked up and saw her still sitting where she had been. Her face was blank of emotion and she was not looking at him.

"Fisher!" she said, not speaking directly to him. "I didn't know. I didn't understand what had happened. Fisher must be real, if he could block you. Or else somebody at the trial was real and was maintaining Fisher." She turned her head and looked at Delman. "Fred, listen!" Her voice lashed out commandingly. "Did you really try to—what did you call it?—shift reality after you were sentenced?"

He nodded dumbly. He could not understand this woman. She was saying things that didn't make sense and yet sounded as if they should.

At his nod, Troy's face lost some of its harshness, and a trace of her former compassion returned to her eyes. "Did you try it before? Did you have any reason for believing you'd be successful?"

"Yes," he said, no longer caring whether there was any logic to his answers or not. "I told you—I thought I created the whole murder." It did not even seem strange any longer that he should be sitting in this cell and talking to his victim.

Comprehension reached her face. It meant nothing to him, for he did not know what it was that

she had finally understood. Then she frowned, as though whatever she had found out was not what she had wanted it to be.

"All right, never mind," she said, and once again he felt that she was commanding herself, rather than talking to him. "We'll talk this out later—you've got as many questions to answer for me as I have for you, but they're not important right now. Just confirm one thing for me. You've tried to shift reality, after a number of successful trials, and failed. Right?"

He nodded again.

"So you're convinced you're incapable of it?"

"Yes."

"*You're wrong.*" The two words flashed out and struck him almost physically. "I'll explain later what I mean when I say Fisher blocked you. Take my word for it, it's a completely normal occurrence for people like us. You haven't lost your ability at all!"

There was little left in him to generate intense emotion any more. He merely twitched a corner of his mouth into a meager smile of unbelief.

His reaction didn't disconcert Troy. She nodded, as though checking off a point on a schedule.

"All right," she said. "I didn't expect you to believe me. I'm perfectly willing to prove it to you. Got a cigarette?"

THE complete unexpectedness of the question jerked his head up. Then he relaxed again.

"No," he said dully.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Look in your pockets."

He went through the motions of patting his empty pockets perfunctorily.

"All right," Troy said. "What brand do you smoke?"

"Philip Morris, mostly."

"What does a pack of those cigarettes look like? Think about it. Visualize it. What does a pack feel like when it's in your shirt pocket?"

Almost automatically, he reached back into his memories and recalled the weight of the pack, adding its minute unbalance to the pull of his shirt on his shoulders, the slight pressure against his chest.

He felt something stirring in his shirt and did not notice that Troy's face became abstracted, as though she, too, were remembering.

The pack of cigarettes was there.

He reached into the pocket almost fearfully and drew it out. He sat expressionless on the edge of the bunk, looking at it in his hand. His fingers writhed, and he tore off the top of the pack almost convulsively, and pushed one of the cigarettes out. Then he looked up at Troy, who was smiling faintly.

"May I have one?" she asked quietly.

Breathless, he extended the pack. "I did that before—twice," he said. "The first time, I thought somebody had left it there for me, or that I'd lost count."

She nodded, taking a cigarette from the pack and lighting it, handing him her lighter so that he could shakily do the same with his.

"You see? Now how about clothes? You can't leave here wearing a prison uniform. What's your favorite color suit?"

Almost afraid to try, but half-confident now, he remembered the feel of fabric and shoulder pads, the stiffness of the collar fold at the back of his neck.

"Gray," he said.

"Go ahead, then. A white shirt—that's easy—and a gray gabardine suit."

He stood up, neatly tailored, his white shirt open at the neck. The gray suit failed, by a shade, to be as dark as he had visualized it, but that was a minor quibble in the triumph that was flooding in to fill the emptiness of the past three weeks.

"What about the clothes I was wearing?" he asked.

She shrugged. "If you can create a suit, I imagine it's no problem to dispose of one. Have a tie."

She held out her hand, with stitched silk folded over it. He took it wordlessly and knotted it around his neck.

"Now shoes and socks. Think you can manage those?"

For some reason, she seemed to think that would be more of a problem than the suit.

He smiled. "If I can do a suit, I guess I can handle shoes without any trouble."

"Well, then?" She was looking at him with an odd watchfulness.

He recalled shoes. Feel, color, texture, weight, and socks. Gradually, with—incredibly, she had been right—greater difficulty, the shoes and socks came into being.

SHE looked at his feet with a faint image of the same wonder he had shown at the cigarette package in his hand. He frowned a little at that, failing to understand it, but dismissed the problem at once.

"How about that haircut?" she asked.

He ran his hand over his prison-cut hair. "Nothing I can do about that, is there?"

"Try."

He ran his fingers over the stiff ends of his hair again and tried to remember the feel of combed strands.

It was as if he had put his hand on something live.

"I wouldn't have dared try *that* stunt!" Troy breathed.

Delman smiled, his eyes sparkling. He pulled a comb out of his hip pocket, ran it through his hair,

and put it back. He patted his pockets.

"Keys, change, fountain pen, address book, wallet—hmm, wallet." He took it out and looked inside. "Driver's license, card from International Surety, gasoline credit card, registration—even a picture of you, Troy—and cash. How much?" He thumbed through the bills. "Wow!"

Troy was looking at him in open astonishment. He grinned at her, put the wallet back, and smoothed his coat down. He reached into his shirt pocket and stopped, a fleeting startled look on his face. Then he grinned again.

"Imagine that! I sent the cigarettes back along with the prison outfit!" He pulled a fresh pack out of his jacket pocket. "This one will do just as well."

Troy shook her head reproachfully. "You're drunk with power," she said. "You realize, of course, that I could—"

Delman reached out and took the coffee cup out of her hand before she spilled it. They were sitting at a corner table in a restaurant in Newcomb.

"—stop you if I wanted to," Troy finished dully. She stared around her at the restaurant.

"In case you're interested," Delman said pointedly, "the date is May third."

Troy's face went white and she suddenly began to cry.

VIII

ONCE again, Delman was in command of the situation. The memory of the terrible period after the fiasco at the trial was fading, unwanted. He sat easily in his chair at the restaurant table, wearing his self-created suit, watching smoke curl from a self-created cigarette.

Troy was sitting opposite him, touching her eyes with the corner of a handkerchief. She was no longer crying, but her head was down and her slim shoulders sagged, as though she were in the presence of an overwhelming defeat.

Delman's mind was racing, struggling to rearrange the pattern of previous events to fit the logic of these new ones.

"I've got a lot of questions to ask you," he told Troy.

She raised her face and looked at him, her expression still strained, a touch of—pity again?—in her eyes, combined with that sense of having been somehow crushed.

"Let's get out of here, then," she said in a tense voice. She got up and walked quickly ahead of him. Delman took his check from a waiter who obviously didn't realize that his table had been unoccupied ten minutes ago.

The bill included two dinners. Delman shrugged. If the waiter remembered the food as having been served and eaten, then it was

up to him to maintain the illusion by paying for it.

What kind of mental process on the waiter's part, he wondered, would cover the memory of something that had not happened?

As he paid the check, smiling back at a cashier who gave him his change with a "Thank you, Mr. Delman," he realized with a shock that he was still amnesiac. He remembered nothing of this town, or of the people in it. His life, as far as he was aware of it, began on May third.

Then his mouth quirked into an anxious expression as he realized that *today* was May third, and that, as far as reality was concerned, the six months he had lived since that *other* May third had never existed. Yesterday—May second—was six months past for him. For anyone else except Troy, it was merely yesterday.

And then he began to understand the waiter's mental processes.

TROY was waiting for him in his car. It was parked at the curb in front of the restaurant. She would recognize it, of course. And it was as familiar to him as an extension of his body. But he had certainly never driven it here—except that anyone standing near this restaurant a half hour ago would have testified with perfect truth that he had.

He got in behind the wheel,

punched the starter and heard the motor rumble up to its powerful hum. He backed away from the curb and swung out into the street, driving slowly toward the center of town.

Troy sat wordlessly beside him, her glance shifting along the various storefronts they passed, her mind obviously busy with something else.

The girl was his biggest problem. When she had first come into his cell, she had embraced him and called him darling, and now, as he remembered that, he knew again that it had not been for the first time.

He glanced at her swiftly before switching his attention back to the street. She was perhaps the most beautiful woman he could remember having seen. *Doesn't mean much, does it?* he reminded himself, and smiled ruefully. But he knew the gibe was unjustified. If he had lost his memory, this did not mean that his mind had been wiped clean, like a blackboard crossed by a damp sponge. He could not remember specific information about his past, but the general values and experiential knowledge acquired during his lifetime had not been swabbed away. He might someday surprise himself with a talent for art, or piano, or toothpick model construction, but he had not lost these things—he merely did not know they were

there, and so had not called upon them.

But, in any case, he was probably safe in assuming that she was in love with him, just as he could feel a vague restlessness whenever he thought of her.

There was still so much buried in his past that he had to find out. In his cell, Troy had several times taken the blame for everything that had happened to him since the accident—including the accident?

Why? What had happened between them? What sort of situation could possibly have led to an attempt on her part to kill him? And if she had tried to kill him then, why had she come to the death cell and helped him to escape?

The thought of what might be crouched in his past, waiting to strike him down as he discovered it, was a cold and disquieting thing.

Something else came to him, and he frowned. The fact that he had known about his powers, and used them, after the accident—Troy hadn't expected that, or liked it. Her actions when she first tried to help him get back to this reality pattern, he knew now, had been based on the assumption that he was completely ignorant of his potential.

There was no time to analyze her motivations now. What was important was the fact that, if she had assumed the entire murder-

pattern to be a part of genuine reality, then that had to be exactly what it was. As one of his own kind, she would instantly have recognized a spurious reality.

And that, of course, meant that he *had* killed her.

He jerked his hands on the wheel, swaying the car, before he steadied down again.

"Troy! I—" he began, but she interrupted him:

"You're driving past the street."

"What street?" He hadn't really had any destination in mind, intending to ask her for directions to her house once he had systematized his thinking.

"The street I live on, of course," she said with automatic annoyance. Then she whirled in her seat, her hand digging into his shoulder, her voice shaking with urgency and ill-concealed relief.

"You mean you're still *amnesiac*?"

She dropped her hand away from him and resumed her previous position, and began trying to cover up her obvious excitement.

"I thought that would be gone, once you got back to a time before the accident," she said. "It's a shock to learn that didn't happen."

But Delman disregarded both her explanatory tone and the content of what she was saying. It was obvious to him—as obvious as her previous sense of defeat had

been—that she had suddenly discovered a high hope of victory.

IX

FOLLOWING her directions, he drove up to her house and parked. Neither of them spoke as she led him into the house, but in the hall she stopped momentarily.

"You've always called my mother 'Mrs. Christian,'" she said in a low voice. "You got along very well with her. You're pretty friendly with my father, but, for God's sake, don't assume a Charles Laughton voice when you call him 'Mr. Christian.' You tried it once and it didn't go over at all."

He nodded agreement. The fewer the people who knew of his lost memory, the better, for the time being. Whatever Troy's motives might be in keeping the knowledge from her parents, there was also an advantage in it for him.

And it was interesting to learn, as well, that Troy's parents were probably not holders of the power, for they both greeted him with the normal degree of casual formality that parents reserve for an accepted future son-in-law, but without any sign of being aware that anything unusual had happened to either Delman or Troy.

Troy led him out to an enclosed porch behind the house, out of earshot from her parents.

"I suppose you want to know just exactly what kind of person you are," she said abruptly.

Delman smiled inwardly at her repressed nervousness. He picked out a comfortable chair and sat down. "I've got a pretty fair idea," he said easily.

"That's what you think!" she said with sudden vehemence. "I've been watching your ego swelling all afternoon, and it's disgusting to see."

Delman could feel himself reacting to that. He was about to answer her sharply when he stopped himself, realizing that the accusation was justified from her point of view. He relaxed again, waiting for her to talk herself out, ready to seize on any information she might let slip in the process.

"You're under full sail for the biggest shock you ever had in your life," she went on. "And that includes what happened to you at the trial. That was just a taste of what you can let yourself in for."

He winced at that, recalling the terror he had felt, as though a bridge, safe and trusted for as long as he could remember, had suddenly collapsed beneath his feet.

He raised his eyebrows in a victorious smile. The bridge hadn't collapsed, after all. He was here, wasn't he, instead of in a death cell?

She turned on him angrily. "You can wipe that smug look off your face, too! You haven't got the faintest idea of what you've been doing, or what you've been lucky enough to get away with."

WITH a vicious imitation of his theatrical gesture in the cell, she pulled a package of cigarettes out of her pocket. "Lo!" she said sarcastically. "A miracle!"

"Just a small one," Delman modestly said.

"Just a small one!" she mimicked out of the depths of some hidden frustration. "Well, you might as well learn right here and now that it's as big a one as you can ever expect to pass again."

Something snarled within Delman. More than wounded vanity, it reacted as though its very life were threatened.

His lips moved into an echo of the snarl, and he sat tensely behind the glittering wheel, the breeze from the open windows washing over him. Almost savagely, he whistled out "*Follow me, follow me, follow me!*" the melody no longer the beckoning strain of a ballad, but the angry arpeggio of a challenge.

He turned his mocking face toward Troy, who sat stiffly as he in the seat beside him.

"All right," he said, "explain that!"

"Fred, stop it!" she cried sud-

denly and unexpectedly. He had thought this demonstration would crush her. Instead, she reacted to it as she would have to a childish prank, ignoring its magnitude entirely. "You won't catch me like that again." Abruptly, her temper broke, and she reached across the space between them and put her hand on his arm. "Look, Fred, I'm sorry, but you *don't* understand. And these time-jumping tantrums don't impress me at all."

"I told you," he said scornfully, fighting off his love for her. "If what I can do isn't something special, what is it?"

But, still, he had been jolted too severely by that one previous failure to retain his confidence entirely. He felt his anger edging away, to be replaced by something that waited, and watched to see what kind of danger the girl's own confidence presented.

She sat quietly for a few minutes, her face unreadable. When she began to speak, her voice was curiously hesitant.

"Fred, you're no different from anyone else like you—from me, for instance, or any of the other real people. You've just been incredibly lucky."

Luck, he thought. *Always luck or coincidence. Will they never learn?* But he asked, "Real people? Oh, you mean those who can shift reality patterns? Meaning that the rest of the world popu-

lation is made up of stock characters and extras."

TROY shook her head in almost overwhelming annoyance. "Are you going to insist on being a megalomaniac?" she demanded savagely. "Look, there are certain people in this world who are different from the rest. Everybody has certain beliefs and desires—even if it's only a belief in an ice cream vending truck coming down the street.

"You've had it happen to you. You'll be sitting on a porch on a hot day. You may just feel vaguely uncomfortable, without knowing specifically what's bothering you. Then a truck comes down the street, a bell jingles, and you realize that all along you've been subconsciously wishing for some ice cream. Or, in other cases, you're aware of the desire, you step out of the house on the odd chance that there might be one coming along—and there is."

Delman nodded. "I can't see the point of all this, but it's happened. There have also been times when I was dying for the guy to come along and he didn't."

Troy smiled grimly. "That's another point we'll cover later. But let's get back to real people. The difference between them and—we might as well call them 'unreal'—people is that the real people maintain the rest of the world for

the fulfillment of their wishes.

"Let's get back to that ice cream truck. Suppose you're one of the real people. Consciously or subconsciously, you want some ice cream. All right, then the truck is the agent of your subconscious mind. To all intents and purposes, you have created the whole thing—driver, ice cream, and all.

"Or else you're the truck driver. You want to sell ice cream. So you create your customers. Or you're the owner of the company. You create trucks, drivers, and customers. Or you manufacture tire lugs. So you create the ice cream company, with its vending trucks, to buy your product. Or you sell the tires, the gasoline, perhaps the cartons or even the flavoring for the ice cream, or you might be in advertising and the ice cream company is a client you've forced into being because you need business.

"Now do you begin to understand how complex it is? Who, in that whole long chain, is the real person? Who exists for whose benefit? Here, answer this—does it rain because you're the weatherman who predicted it would?"

Delman had been thinking frantically, trying to fit these new concepts into his personal philosophy without shattering it. When Troy had entered his cell, he had had to give up the belief in a world maintained by himself alone. That

was a wrench, but still it had kept the number of rulers down to an exclusive two. Now she wanted him to accept the fact—and he knew it was a fact—that there were many, maybe very many. He cringed inwardly, afraid she'd go even further in her attack on his convictions, afraid, above all, that she could prove she was right and he was wrong. Then where would his philosophy—and himself—be?

"You haven't answered," she said impatiently.

"Answered what?" he asked, his face still blank with thought.

"Why it rains."

He laughed uneasily. "Most of the time, it doesn't rain when the weatherman predicts it. It rains when you wash your windows. Any TV comic knows that."

SHE went on without giving him a chance to interrupt. "Back to the ice cream truck again. You said yourself that it sometimes doesn't come. Why not? You're a real person." Her voice became sarcastic again. "You can work miracles. Why doesn't the truck come? Why couldn't you 'shift realities' after the trial?"

Once more, Delman felt the remembered touch of his terror. "I don't know," he said belligerently, as if it had been her fault. "Why couldn't I?"

"Because all the real people have the same powers as you,

that's why! Because you've got a neighbor up the block who's a real person, too, and who hates the sound of bells on ice cream trucks. Because there was somebody at the trial who was a real person and was convinced that you were a murderer. Because you're not any more powerful than the rest of us. So the truck doesn't come. And so you, you poor fool, couldn't 'shift realities!'"

That was the answer, he thought, and added, *Yes, partially*. He could be blocked—it had happened often enough and never with any explanation, only with bewilderment and frustration. There could be no explanation as long as he thought he was the only real person. Even if there had been only himself and Troy, she couldn't and wouldn't keep watch so closely that she could thwart him as often as he had been. Then there had to be very many real people whose wishes and powers were, awarely or not, opposed to his.

But knowing this made him stronger than they were. He could prove it.

He reached into his pocket, took out a cigarette, lit it with a match from the restaurant ashtray in front of him. He dropped the match into the dashboard ashtray, sent Troy a look of scornful challenge, and confidently got his hands back on the wheel in time.

"Try to sneak one in on me, will you?" she said, her lips white and narrow.

He drove blithely, but not so blithely that he couldn't hear and register what she continued to say, her voice taut and clipped.

"Will you at least listen? I said before that you'd been incredibly lucky. Don't you realize yet what happened to you?"

"You had the accident. It wasn't supposed to be as bad as it was, but you must have meddled with my—with *the* original plan. You went amnesiac immediately and you were in serious danger of dying. Because your conscious mind was lost, your subconscious was free of all restraint. It knew it was threatened and reached out desperately and automatically. The few memories you have of that must be the basis for your silly idea that you can 'shift realities.' What's that supposed to mean—there are an infinite number of possible realities that you're capable of creating, that they all run concurrently, and that you can switch them back and forth?"

WITH her original plan of the accident? Then she had really planned it! But why? Again, the constantly returning "Why?" She had caused his accident and he had killed her for it, whether he'd recalled the motive or not. And

she was sitting beside him, her hand still on his, alternately digging savage nails and then relaxing with love—the love that had to be at least partly responsible for her concern over him. The love that had made her try to kill him and that had killed her instead?

And then the last thing she had said found room for attention in the tumbling jumble of his mind.

"There aren't an infinite number of realities?" he asked.

"No, there aren't," she said with ironic patience. "There's only one—*this* one. We real people might touch it up a little here and there, but it's the one and only, the *unum* without any *pluribus*. The only thing you did, World-shaper, was time-hopping."

He looked at her blankly. "You said that before. I thought you were being sarcastic."

Troy explained with the exaggerated carefulness she might have used on a backward child. "Time is subjective for us real people. That means it's only what we think or want it to mean. I'm sure you've been surprised when something that was supposed to go on for a long while—a movie, a book you were reading, anything that you were enjoying—suddenly came to an end. You'd look at your watch and it would show that the right length of time had gone by, but it wouldn't have, really. You could *feel* it hadn't. Or else something

that was supposed to happen fast would drag out for what seemed like hours.

"All you did was to time-hop like mad, going forward to times when the various things that had gone wrong with you had been healed, then dropping back to the time you'd come from. Why do you think I'm here talking to you? How did I get into your cell, months after you'd killed me? Because, *now*, I haven't been killed yet, and when you did kill me, I hopped around the event."

"No" he said. The foundations were slipping from under his self-confidence. Once more, one answered set of questions only led to another to be answered.

The car rocked as his hand shook the wheel, frantic.

"Maybe the control of time is one of the attributes of the real people, but it doesn't explain my case," he maintained stubbornly. "It doesn't even explain your death. How could I hop forward in time until my arm was set and healed, until a plastic surgeon had given me my face back, and then be discovered in my bed, back in the time I'd come from, *without* the broken arm and the mangled face? How could the hospital staff not notice these things? How could you hop around the event of your murder, and still leave a corpse to be photographed and examined and buried?"

TROY shook her head in pity, all her anger gone, her face sorrowful. She looked up at him.

"But that's exactly what happened, Fred. I told you that you'd been incredibly lucky. There wasn't a single real person on that hospital staff, just as there wasn't a single real person involved when my body was found. And there's never been an extra who questions what happens under the director's orders. I don't know what the hospital staff did to account for the sudden inconsistencies. Probably they didn't have to account for it, because their records and memories were changed. I don't know what the county coroner thought he was working on when he examined my body, or thought he did.

"We're not mind-readers. We're only real people. I can't even be sure the unreal people think at all. They may run on conditioned reflexes of some kind, or they may just flicker into some brief, fragmentary kind of life and then vanish until we need them again. I don't even know what went on in the minds of the guards at the State Prison when they let me into your cell. Nothing, evidently, because they didn't recognize and stop me. If one of them had been real—well, that was the chance I took.

"But don't you see what the tragedy of the situation must be?

We're the Lords of All, yes, but we're *all* Lords of All. Because we can influence each other. If one wants ice cream, and another doesn't, the truck doesn't come—except at the desire of *another* real person, whose desire in turn may be canceled out by someone else, and so on, until the decision on whether the truck is to come or not depends on someone who may be thousands of miles away, but whose decision on something else may have influenced something else, the working out of which may depend on the amount of traffic on a certain street on a certain day, and not have anything specific to do with ice cream at all.

"Suppose you wanted a definite pattern of ripples to reach the edge of a pool. So you throw in a pebble where it will create that pattern. But your neighbor and his neighbors throw in a pebble, too, and another, and another, until what is actually created *may* resemble what you wanted, but only as the result of a compromise that's only a bit more certain than pure chance."

She let a flicker of sad amusement light her eyes. "Don't you see? The only thing that keeps the real people from being almost godlike is that there are so many real people. Each with a will of his own, and all, to some extent, in conflict. As long as you were

in situations where only a limited number of people were involved, the odds were vastly against another of them being a real person—so you could delude yourself. But there were too many people involved in the trial. One of them was real. He canceled out your time-hop and you went to prison."

DELMAN was combing his memories. And always, whenever he thought he was shifting the patterns of reality, the ability to time-hop served as an equally valid and simpler explanation.

But the part of his mind that was almost an entity in itself would not listen, and did not want him to listen. And the other part of him struggled as hard as the first to *make* him listen. He shook spasmodically as his brain fought itself, as one part of him accepted the new explanation, and the other clung to the old as though at a limb projecting from the face of a cliff over which it would tumble into death if it slackened its hold for so much as a moment. He felt his pulse jump, then fade, then jump and fade again. Something live and fear-stricken fluttered in his chest. He was suddenly drenched in sweat, and the car began to cross from one side of the road to the other and back again, weaving drunkenly, while his mouth opened and closed and dry sounds

came out of his throat.

Anxiety attack, his purely informational centers told him. He could not believe, and he could not *not* believe. He could not go, and he could not stay. His body was immobile, for his mind tried to make it do two things at once.

His foot locked on the brakes and the car slammed to a stop in the middle of the road, vibrating madly on its suspensions. He was flung forward on the wheel, and he hung over it, gasping, his face pale and sweat-drenched, while his limp, dangling fingers shook.

"Fred! What is it?" Troy's arms were around his shoulders, tight and urgent.

"Got—got to get out of here," he forced through his throat. "Too much. Too close."

Troy, frantic, not understanding what was happening, misinterpreted the vocalized need to escape the truth.

"Get out of here? You mean time-hop to somewhere else? Where you'll feel better? The house, Fred—my house. Back to the porch. I'll take you. Just don't fight me. Don't cancel me out, and I'll take you."

And another part of his mind, the part that knew how close he was to the time the accident had happened, that understood how much of his shock was the mere knowledge that he was in the car and driving toward the crossroads

where he had almost died, where his face had been terribly lacerated, reached out gratefully and fought down the part that insisted he was above mortal flesh.

For a moment, even if only for the moment, all of him could admit how pitifully frail he was and how much he needed help.

HE opened his eyes and saw the porch ceiling, and his hoarse breathing calmed, his pulse slowly returning to normal. Troy's hand stroked his head as it lay on her lap. He was stretched out on a wrought-iron couch, and the sun had jumped back two hours in the sky.

He felt something like peace returning to his mind, but then his brain began to work frantically again, almost desperately, as the part of him that had let him come here with her, that did not consider this time-hop to be the self-abasement of a godlike mind, fought to tell him as much as it could before he began to war with himself again.

And, once again, there was a new explanation to systematize. At the hospital, he had, under the goading of his subconscious, traveled into time, living at a telescoped time-rate while his body was healed, and then returning. The apartment in New York had been a creation of that same bewildered urge to flee, to fight, to

hide in a lair, to get help. With his consciousness blank, shocked into inactivity, his subconscious had brought him out of the hospital into New York, and had taken him to Roger Bates.

And there the disastrous flow of half-truths and misinformation had begun.

A man is two minds. One—the subconscious—never sleeps, never rests, never tires. Into it are channeled all the things which influence him from the first moment of self-awareness to the last. There, faithfully recorded, are all the things he has seen, heard, tasted, touched, and felt.

It is the conscious mind that is the superficial man. It is the surface level of his being, reacting to what his subconscious tells him.

Linked and intimate, the two minds together are the living man.

Sleep and amnesia break the link. In sleep, the flow of data from the subconscious becomes random, and the only conscious reaction may be some physical reflex to the events in the dream. A grunt, a restless turning, a moan, somnambulism, and the apparently senseless burst of words.

But, in amnesia, the conscious is awake. It reacts. And reacts with the naivete of a child, for whole sections of subconscious data are no longer available to it. That is the purpose of amnesia.

Roger Bates had given him data

—and the few facts his crippled mind had to work with had let him think he was God.

Though the link may be broken, the locked-away memories remain operative. They pursue a sort of half life, unable to directly influence the man, but still fighting, still struggling to become part of the functioning whole again.

THE flow of his thoughts slowed. Troy was looking at her, her eyes sparkling with tears, while she watched the struggle reflected on his face. But he did not have time to stop thinking, to let the re-integrative process come to a halt. His mind raced on.

His amnesia was almost total. If Troy had planned the accident to do just that to him, then she had planned it well—as well as her limited knowledge went. But she hadn't allowed for the fact that amnesia can be caused by organic damage to the brain—the oversimplified blow-on-the-head forgetfulness chronicled in a newspaper or magazine somewhere at least once a week—or by a psychic shock. He had gotten both. What the gross organic damage from his concussion had not done, the desperate need *not to know* had finished. The concussion had been rectified long ago, but the other remained, for his drama inside—the new drama, built from the few scraps of data acquired since

his first true awakening, healed, in the hospital—had never been given the information that she had created the accident, though not intending to kill or maim him, and that he had had his revenge.

So, while his conscious mind thought he was God, and had apparent proof, the locked-away data files searched frantically for a way to convince him he was not, for that was the first step in the series of shocks that would restore their availability to him. Working not through the normal channels of automatic information, but through the brute force of successive traumas, they flung him back toward—he dissolved the increasing strain of his reasoning with an acid laugh—reality.

Troy's eyes widened with apprehension.

Delman said, "Relax, darling. I just realized something." He chuckled, and Troy, still not understanding completely, still withholding the secret of her involvement in the accident and her reasons for it, but nevertheless in love with him, smiled back.

Delman got up, took her hands and lifted her from the couch. He kissed her, holding her as closely to him as his arms and her arms could bring them together.

"Rog Bates was right," Delman said softly. "I did kill you."

She nodded her head silently, her hair brushing against his

cheek. "You knew I was responsible for the accident. I don't know how you knew, but you must have. You called me from the hospital. I didn't know what to think, but I met you on the street in front of the hospital."

"July tenth," he remembered. "I was in the middle of a time-hop, I suppose. My right arm had healed by then. It was strong enough to strangle you."

The only laws the subconscious knows are survival—and vengeance. It has no other morals.

"I—" he began brokenly, but she stopped him.

"I did worse to you," she said. "After my first panic had passed, I was able to time-hop. I left the fact of my death behind, but the damage to your brain goes with you, whatever you do."

The two of us, he thought, lashing out and hurting each other, standing here, in love.

X

SO he had believed himself to be God. And the struggling fragment of his mind, having had its revenge, now used that to precipitate him into a situation where he would learn, and learn cataclysmically, that he was not.

That telephone call to the Newcomb police, almost as soon as his subconscious had become aware of the fact that he would

soon think of himself as something equivalent to God, had started the chain of inevitable events that had left him, broken and shaking, in the prison cell.

Holding Troy, he laughed ironically. Because his subconscious, working handcuffed and blindfolded, had chosen the manner of shock unwisely. In order to escape from the prison, he had had to be God again.

And he was still God, the swelling knowledge surged into him. A god who was intellectualizing himself out of existence, but a god whose drama inside still operated on the belief that he was omnipotent, for he was still amnesiac. He was not the Frederick Delman whose consciousness had ended with the accident. He was the other Frederick Delman, the one who had fought and groped his way forward, trapped by the workings of his own mind, struggling with himself as he blundered on, beset by shadows and attacked by fantasies.

If the individuality of the pre-accident Frederick Delman fought to survive, so did the one that had risen in him since that first May third.

Effectively speaking, the entire lifetime of the Frederick Delman that was he, standing here, had been oriented around the fact that he held the spinning world in his grasp. And now, based on that

absolute conviction within himself, his godhood began its most desperate struggle, for if it failed now, it was doomed, and the legitimate Frederick Delman would return.

"What happened, Troy?" he asked softly. "Why did you get me into the accident? How did you become aware that you were one of the real people?"

"I was lucky," Troy said. "The same way you were. Nothing came along to challenge me. For a long time, I was one of the only real people in this area. I must have been, because my whole life was a series of fortunate 'coincidences.' I've said 'lucky.' We both know what kind of luck it is. It lets us build up all sorts of grandiose conceptions about ourselves, and then the rug gets yanked out from under our feet."

HIS hands stiffened around her, and dropped. He looked at her sharply.

She nodded. "I never thought I was God—it wasn't as clear-cut a series of 'proofs' as yours was. But I always got what I wanted. I went through school without having to really study. I grew up to be a beautiful girl who made fabulous money by modeling, and some day—" her hand touched his cheek lightly—"Prince Charming was going to come looking for me and marry me."

"I'm convinced that's the way it is, to one degree or another, with most of the real people. They go through life, unaware of what they are, with an occasional ice cream truck coming down the street for them, or a lost watch turning up, or the right person meeting them at the right time. They don't miss trains and they don't get killed crossing streets. They defy the law of averages and, eventually, they die happily in bed.

"Or the other alternatives happen. Nothing ever goes right. Or, if it does, it only leads to some greater disaster. These are the accident-prones, the frustrated, the ones who never make it to the railroad station in time or win at cards. Those are the self-defeatists. They can't believe they deserve all the seemingly wonderful things that could happen to them. So, rather than fulfilling their wishes with their ability, they use it to thwart themselves.

"I think most real people, being human, are mixtures of those qualities. Most of us use our time-hopping ability to make a pleasurable thing shorter and an unpleasant one longer. Maybe it's a way to balance off the good things we get."

An admirable rationalization, Delman's godhood said skeptically.

"You've got to realize that it's not a case of patricians and slaves.

It's just that people—all real people—have always had the ability to get the things they wish for. The unreal people, and all the material things we have, to some extent are just the agencies by which we provide for ourselves. Like hands, or tools.

"We're all human, Fred, with all the failings that human beings have, and, being human, each of us wants a world that's just a little different from the world anyone else wants. So, where the wishes clash, they cancel out, and we get a compromise that's called reality."

SHE stopped for a moment. "You'll never be able to think you're a god again, Fred. And I'm never going to be as lucky as I used to be. Because I'm going to continue canceling you out, just as you, unconsciously, not knowing what you were, canceled me out when you moved into town."

"I what?"

"You came into town on a case. I met you and we fell in love. I should have been happy." She was crying again, softly, her head pressed on his shoulder. "But, all of a sudden, I lost my ability. I hadn't known I was one of the real people, either, but I knew there was something wrong when my 'coincidences' and 'lucky accidents' stopped happening. They

say opposites attract. They do—but among real people, they produce cancelation. Nothing went right, because whatever I wanted to happen, you wanted something else. I couldn't understand it. You didn't notice it nearly as much as I did, because you'd never had the experience of being as lucky as I had."

"No, in a city like New York, the cancelations must be almost complete," he said, speaking automatically while his godhood raced back and forth in his head, trying to find some way to escape.

"I began to wonder," Troy said. "There was a little bit to help me. A man called Berkeley . . ."

Berkeley! Delman thought.

"And there were a few other people who'd wondered and managed to leave a hint or two where it could be found. But I didn't understand fully and there wasn't time. If you began to fight me any harder, I couldn't get *anything* done. I figured that if you could get amnesia, maybe you'd forget about your abilities. So I wished an automobile accident on you.

"It wasn't meant to happen the way it did—I had visualized it perfectly, but something went wrong. You weren't conscious of your abilities, so I didn't think you'd be able to interfere. But somehow you were. Only it must have been just a formless kind of thing that

intensified the accident, a last, random, bewildered try to *change* things—and changing them in the wrong direction."

TROY began to cry violently. "I didn't think you'd be hurt so badly. I didn't mean it to be permanent, either. I just needed time to stabilize my own abilities, and then I was going to give you another shock, and bring your abilities back, and we were going to be married, and . . ."

She hadn't realized that the attributes that made him a real person were the most permanent things about him—about any of the real people. He could be stripped of his consciousness, robbed of all memory, but his abilities would remain.

And, under special circumstances, they'd run wild while his mind, in its bewilderment, brought up hypothesis after megalomaniac hypothesis to explain what was happening.

And then, finally, he remembered the memory that had come to him while he cowered in the New York apartment—the memory of that time, years before, when his father had talked to him, and tried, in his own way, to account for the presence of the unreal people.

Father? Had it been his father? How is it possible for an amnesiac to have memories? Had the whole

thing been a fabrication of his trapped subconscious knowledge and awareness? Or, if not a fabrication, then an actual memory, laboriously forced into the awareness of the amnesiac Frederick Delman in an attempt to furnish him with the crucial information?

And this time, he had come too close. The entire structure of logic and truth that had been so painfully given to him by Troy and by the struggling, locked-away, true personality was swept aside. This, for the Frederick Delman who had come into consciousness since the accident, was not *probable* death, or the slow breaking of the single limb at the edge of the cliff. This was death, this was falling, and if what had happened in the car was an anxiety attack, this was ravening fury.

His hand smashed out and cracked against her face.

"Stop it!" he shouted. "I don't believe you!"

How could he accept what he knew was true? It threatened the entire existence of the god, Frederick Delman.

I am a god! I can do anything! he shouted to himself, and if he knew this was not the truth, he forgot that he knew, forgot, and forgot still more, discarded data, shedding rationality, stumbling back to the only thing that was of any relevance—the pinnacle of his belief that he was a god.

SHE fell back from him, her expression at first completely surprised and incredulous, then bitter and defeated, as it had been in the restaurant.

"I thought I had convinced you," she said dully, staring at him as he stood in front of her, quivering in his fury. "I couldn't stand to see what happened to you in the cell and the way you acted afterward. It was so much like my own reaction, before I fully understood what I was."

"Enough, damn it! I don't want to hear any more!"

"It's all my fault!" she cried. "If I hadn't tried to keep you from canceling me out . . ." Tears were running down her cheeks. "I thought, when you time-hopped back, that you'd regained your memory. So, when you kept on acting the same way you had been, I thought you were *really* insane."

She raised her face. "But you're not. You just didn't get your memory back." Hope was beginning to come into her voice, overriding the hysterical reaction. "I can still prove to you that you're wrong."

"Fred," she said, her voice growing calmer and firmer, "you're not superhuman."

The god, Frederick Delman, looked down at her with his infinite understanding.

"I am, Troy. I can do anything. The suit I'm wearing, the watch on my wrist, my cigarettes, my

wallet—all these, I made."

Unbelievably, Troy smiled. "No. Not at first. I came, to your cell expecting you to be completely ignorant of your power. Then, when I found out differently, I did what I thought was the simplest thing to handle in the short time I had." She bit her lip. "I've made a lot of mistakes. I gave you too much confidence. I found a real person who had just encountered his first cancelation after a conscious wish, and I thought the only way to snap you out of that was to let you play at being a demi-god.

"You didn't make the first pack of cigarettes or the suit, Fred. I did. It was only after that, when you thought you were responsible, that you had the confidence to really do it. You made your own shoes, but you're not a god."

As though it had split into his heart itself, the crack sprang into being across the foundations of his rationale. *If this were true . . .* That was not some flummery that she had tricked him with while he was off-guard, in the car. This was an attack on the very proof of his godhood.

HE caught himself at the lip of the pinnacle and smiled, calmly now, at his near-panic. He had only to repeat the proof.

It was the greatest and the smallest surprise of his life.

He smiled and his gentle fingers touched her cheek where Frederick Delman, god, had struck her. There was nothing he could say to her now. The enormity of what had happened since May third, since today, was too complex for apologies. But he remembered all the times she had touched his hand when he needed her most, or kissed him, since he had moved to Newcomb and found her, and he knew that he could tell her anything he felt in a few words.

He smiled without tension. "It's a lot simpler life without a world to run."

She sighed and smiled back, all the strain of watching his fight rushing from her at once. "If only it weren't so hard to learn, darling! Want to go for a ride?"

And that, too, was a symbol and not a non sequitur, for it meant they could live in the same world and work together, as they had worked together when she and his amnesiac self had fled back to the house after anxiety had overwhelmed him. It could be done—and never again in fear or flight.

"Sure," he said. "Let's go."

XI

THEY drove down the road, listening to the song on the radio.

They smiled together, half-shyly. The breeze blew in through the open window and washed over them. The sun was warm and the air was cool and it was spring.

"Fred—" Troy began.

"Watch," he said and reached into an empty pocket.

"No, dear," she contradicted gently. "I'm afraid you're out of cigarettes. Have one of mine?"

There were none in his pocket. The god, Frederick Delman, whimpered in his rocking Val-balla.

"Let it be tomorrow!" he shouted.

"But today is Wednesday, darling," she said, smiling as if correcting a trivial mistake.

He was a god, and dying, and it was a frightful thing for a god to die, for the world and all in and on and around it would die with him, falling back into that Chaos which is recorded in Genesis.

But it was equally true that if the world fell into Chaos, then it followed that he had died.

Yet the world was still there, the blue driving the gray out of the sky, the houses and trees and birds as substantial as ever.

He was alive and breathing, aware of every sense—the touch of breeze and the sight of light and the sound of day and the taste of spring and the smell of a girl's perfume.

He looked in bewilderment at her. Something—somebody?—had died. Who or what was it? The agony had been great enough to make him feel it had been himself who had died, but he was alive and the world was still there. And then he knew.

It had been Frederick Delman; sex, omnipotent; age, eternal; occupation, god; cause of death, terminated employment.

Reality—the compromise reality of the real people—remained. And Fred Delman remained with it.

"Let's get some ice cream," he said, completing the cure.

They came to the corner and he turned the car leisurely out of the secondary road onto the sunlit white swath of the highway. The light truck came over the crest of the hill behind them, pulled up to the intersection and stopped, waiting for customers from the cars that would be passing along the highway from the beach in another half-hour or so.

That, at any rate, was as good an explanation as any.

Fred stopped the car and he and Troy got out. They walked toward the ice cream truck.

"Vanilla?" Fred asked.

"Chocolate," she said.

They knew there would be both.

Alfred Budy

The Helpful Haunt

By RICHARD DEMING

*He'd have been a dilly of a
valet—if he'd only been alive.*

Illustrated by KOSSIN

I HAD always been rather provoked at my grandfather for putting Aunt Mitzie away. Of course she was sub-normal, but hardly enough of a mental defective to require institutional care. Beyond an unnatural amount of superstition, I cannot recall her acting in the least strange when I was a child. My main recollection is of how devotedly she lavished her love on me, and how outrageously I took advantage of it by getting her to wait on me hand and foot, like some imperious infant prince.

I used to argue with grandfather that she could easily support herself as a domestic if he could not afford to support her, reminding him how spotless and well-ordered our big apartment had been when she lived with us.

"It's not a question of what she can do," he would snap at me. "It's a matter of what she will do. She had her chance at several domestic positions, but prefers the home. She's made up her stubborn little mind she'll either live *here* or *there*, and there's no talking her into a third alternative."

"Then why can't she come back and live with us?"

"Because I want some privacy in my old age!" he would yell at me. "I won't have that woman underfoot, even if she is my own daughter!"

HAD I payed more attention to grandfather, I would have left Aunt Mitzie to brood away her life in the home for feeble-minded, and consequently never would have encountered Roger Beckwith's ghost. But when the old man died, the apartment seemed much too big for me and was always in a mess, for I lacked grandfather's talent with cleaning women. By then I had become a successful enough architect to be able to support a dozen indigent relatives if necessary, and since Aunt Mitzie was my last living relative, it seemed the perfect solution to remove her from the home and install her as my housekeeper.

Almost immediately I discovered what grandfather had meant by Aunt Mitzie getting underfoot, but I failed to see why he'd objected. I had been seven when she'd gone away to the home, and she picked up our relationship exactly as though twenty years had not transpired in the meantime. That is, she showered on me all the love, care, attention and worry it would have been appropriate to shower on a seven-year-old.

In a way I suppose the mess that was to come was as much my fault as her own, for prior to marrying and bringing Ellen home I certainly gave Aunt Mitzie's protective instinct free rein. Partly it was because I felt sorry for her, and partly it was pure selfishness.

I told myself that I was being generous in giving a home to a lonely old maid whom no one else wanted and letting her lavish on me all the love in her affection-starved soul, but at the same time I enjoyed her attentions. It was pleasant to have my apartment kept spic and span, to find my bureau drawers always full of freshly laundered clothes, to find breakfast on the table every morning when I got up.

It gave me something of a lord-of-the-manor feeling to have her hover about like a perfect servant, holding a flame to my cigarette the moment I put it to my lips, running for my coat as though she were a mind-reader the instant I looked as though I might want to go out. In my mind's eye I can see her yet, poor soul, her thin body alertly perched on the edge of a chair, her eyes devouring my every movement and her head cocked birdlike to one side, eager to jump and perform the most menial service which might gave me pleasure.

Looking back, I can see that the reason I had no feeling of my privacy being invaded by Aunt Mitzie was that I lived my private life *outside* my home. Aunt Mitzie knew none of my friends, for when I entertained I used my club just as I had before she came. Nor did she have any more than the vaguest interest in my work, knowing only that it concerned draw-

ing-boards and the construction of houses and that there was never any worry about money. I had no sense of my privacy being invaded because as a bachelor I used the apartment for little more than a place to eat and sleep and find fresh laundry.

It had not occurred to me that after I married, my private life would abruptly move *inside* my home.

SHORTLY after Aunt Mitzie moved in I thought it rather cute when, without asking, she converted the unused den off my bedroom into a small bedroom for herself and moved there from the guest room I had assigned her. Since only an open arch separated my room and the den, she hung a drape in the archway. When she slept I don't know, for after she moved into the den, all I had to do was roll over in bed and make the springs creak, and there she would be, a thin robe clutched around her spare figure, worriedly leaning over me to see if perhaps I were on the verge of falling out of bed.

I found this nightly attention amusing—until I stopped sleeping alone.

In retrospect I suppose there is an element of humor in the first night Ellen and I spent at home, hut at the time it seemed a ghastly nightmare. It started pleasantly

enough. When we returned from our ten-day honeymoon, the apartment was decked with flowers and Aunt Mitzie met us at the door beaming with love for both of us. It was amazing, really, how she immediately managed to gush forth as much love for Ellen as she ever had for me. It touched Ellen, of course, and through all the terrible (or funny, depending on your point of view) weeks that followed before we found a solution to the problem, we somehow both managed to retain our fondness for the old lady in spite of our exasperation. And through it all we managed not to hurt her feelings again, after that first night.

Up until bedtime Ellen was enthusiastic about Aunt Mitzie. The old lady's cooking had always been superb, and for this occasion she had gone all out, preparing roast stuffed pheasant so delicious that we both ate like pigs.

Even after dinner, as we sat talking over our trip in the front room, Aunt Mitzie's attentions seemed to please rather than oppress Ellen. She was such a silent little creature—you soon grew used to her flitting to perform small chores which you could easily have done yourself, such as adding wood to the fire or changing records on the radio-phonograph, or running to bring you the paper when you so much as glanced toward it.

When we finally went to our room and found all our luggage unpacked and neatly stored away, Ellen laughed with delight.

"She's a jewel, isn't she? It looks like I won't have much to do in the way of keeping house."

At that moment, we heard the hall door open into the den-bedroom off ours, and I experienced my first twinge of misgiving. Pushing aside the drape between the two rooms, I smiled in at Aunt Mitzie.

"I thought maybe you would have moved back into the guest room," I said in a pleasant tone.

SHE looked at me as though it were the most shocking suggestion she had ever heard. "Why, Don, honey, how would I ever hear you if you needed me?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say rather sharply that we needed no one but ourselves in the privacy of our own room, but the look of unselfish love in her eyes stopped the words. Somewhat weakly I intimated that we would discuss the matter in the morning and dropped the drape back in place.

Ellen cast a rather bewildered frown at the thin drape, then she shrugged her slim shoulders, winked at me and began to undress. When I switched off the light a few minutes later, the light in Aunt Mitzie's room was already

off and we could hear her climbing into bed.

"Good night, Aunt Mitzie," I called.

"Good night, darlings," her soft voice came back.

For nearly ten minutes I lay on my back, holding Ellen's hand and feeling the warmth of her body next to mine. I could feel a tenseness in her limbs which matched the tenseness in my own, and realized that we were both straining our ears in the hope of hearing deep breathing from the next room, which would indicate that Aunt Mitzie slept. The realization irritated me, and deliberately I turned on my side and drew my wife into my arms.

The springs creaked and the next instant Aunt Mitzie was leaning over the bed and peering down at us worriedly.

Sitting up in bed, I said coldly, "Will you please get out of our room, Aunt Mitzie."

I could not have hurt her more if I had cut her across the face with a whip. Yet to her underdeveloped mind my remark had none of the force of an order. In her thoughts I was still a child whose responsibility it was hers to protect, and a child does not issue orders to an adult. I might hurt her by returning her love with childish anger and mean words, but I could not sway what she regarded as her duty.

She said gently, "I thought maybe one of you was falling out of bed, Don, honey," and quietly returned to her room.

I PREFER not to dwell on the rest of that night. It suffices to say that Aunt Mitzie was in our room almost as much as her own. I expostulated with her. I gave her orders, I even swore at her, but nothing would keep her out. I think my loud displeasure brought her in more frequently, in fact, for I dimly recall that when she cared for me as a child she always increased her attentiveness when I was mean to her. She had a vague theory that children become difficult when they are ill, and I believe she thought my anger a symptom of illness.

On Aunt Mitzie's second visit Ellen went into hysterical giggling, and before the third she went to sleep. But I lay awake most of the night listening to worried silence from the next room. And every time I shifted position, back would come Aunt Mitzie.

The nights which followed were identical. It very quickly became obvious nothing less than brute force would keep Aunt Mitzie out of our room. Explanations that we wished to be left alone were met with worried sighs. It occurred to me that possibly the old lady was unaware that boys and girls were different, and had no

notion as to why a man and wife should object to an audience in their bedroom—but I was not going to lecture a woman past sixty about *that*.

When we finally decided that we had the choice either of enduring our lack of privacy permanently or returning Aunt Mitzie to the home for feeble-minded, we were beaten. It would have broken her heart to be committed again, and neither Ellen nor I could bring ourselves to do that.

Our marriage took on the nature of a clandestine teen-age love affair. With Aunt Mitzie forever underfoot, we could find privacy nowhere in our home. We took to going for evening rides, frequently parking in lovers' lanes. And sometimes, when the weather was nice, we would leave the car alongside a country road and walk across fields to the privacy of a haystack or a clump of bushes.

The Sunday afternoon we met the ghost of Roger Beckwith we were simply searching for a place to be alone.

THE small village of Redfern lies about forty miles north of our home, and it was not until we were aimlessly drifting through its outskirts that I recalled that my great-grandfather on my mother's side had once owned a house there which was now reputed to be haunted. Not having passed

through Redfern since I was a child, the village being on none of the main highways, out of curiosity I suggested to Ellen that we look the old place up.

"If it's still standing, it ought to be deserted enough to suit us," I said. "A servant of my great-grandfather's is supposed to haunt it. Can't recall the story, but I believe great-grandfather killed him, or caused him to be killed, or something like that."

We stopped at a drugstore to find out if the old place still existed, and learned it did, but had recently been sold.

"A Mr. Reddy from New York bought it," the elderly druggist told us. "Can't imagine why. House is over a hundred years old, supposed to be haunted and hasn't been painted for fifty years. Must be costing him more than he paid for the place to put it in condition."

"Oh, it's been fixed up?" I asked.

"Started. Guess the inside is almost finished. Don't think Reddy has moved in yet, though. Don't imagine he'd mind you looking at it. No doubt it's locked, but you can see the outside. You one of these psychic research fellows?"

"No. Just curious."

"Lot's of them been around here to investigate. But never found anything, far as I know. You see any ghosts, stop back and tell me. I'm local correspondent

for the *New York Times*."

He told us to go to the edge of town, turn left, and said we would find my great-grandfather's old home standing by itself about a quarter-mile past the village line.

We found it without difficulty, a huge boxlike building with overhanging eaves and an air of mouldering but ruffled dignity about it. The lawn had long ago disappeared under a mass of weeds, but now the weeds had been scythed down and left where they had fallen to form a springy mat in front of the house. Fresh glass, where broken panes had been replaced, still bore paper stickers of the manufacturer. Painters had not yet gotten to the outside of the house, but fresh siding which comprised nearly a third of the building's outside indicated the many places where the original wood had rotted out. A pile of lumber and a tarp-covered bathtub near one corner completed the anachronisms of the scene.

Though the druggist had hinted we would find no one about, I knocked on the heavy, old-fashioned door anyway. We were surprised when it was immediately opened by a round-figured, dignified-looking gentleman wearing side-whiskers. He was dressed in formal morning wear of old-fashioned cut but impeccable design, a high-winged collar and an Ascot tie.

HE gave us a slight, extremely dignified bow and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Mr. Reddy?" I asked in some confusion.

When the man spoke, he disclosed a pronounced British accent. "Mr. Reddy has not yet moved in, sir. Won't for nearly a week, I believe. But do come in and have some tea. I have just finished making it."

We found ourselves inside before we had time to appreciate fully the oddness of a total stranger inviting us to tea without so much as asking who we were. Leading us into a high-ceilinged parlor completely furnished with new modern furniture and smelling of fresh paint, he waved us to a small sofa before which stood a coffee table.

"I am really most bappy you people dropped in, sir," he said, rubbing his hands together and looking pleased. "It has been quite boring here, you know. And it has been some time since I had any facilities available for serving tea."

Since this statement made little sense to either of us, we simply waited for him to go on.

He said, "You look rather surprised to find me here, sir, if I may take the liberty of commenting on your expression. But it's perfectly all right. I'm Roger Beckwith, the butler."

Now I was even more astonished. A butler inviting casual strangers in and playing the part of host in his master's house was unconventional to say the least, but almost unbelievable when the strangers, for all he knew, might be friends of his employer, and the butler was as dignified appearing as Roger Beckwith. For in spite of his cheerful and friendly manner, he was as formidably respectable-looking as only an English butler can be.

"You're Mr. Reddy's butler?" I asked.

He chuckled heartily. "Oh, heavens, no, sir. Mr. Livingston's. Excuse me a moment and I'll bring in the tea."

Rubbing his hands in pleased anticipation, he moved toward a closed door which I assumed led into the dining room. In his eagerness he walked very briskly, apparently either so nearsighted or so preoccupied with the thought of serving tea that he failed to notice it was closed. I opened my mouth to shout a warning, then left it open without uttering a word.

Roger Beckwith walked through the door and disappeared.

BELATEDLY, the name he had mentioned as his employer registered, and the hair rose along the nape of my neck.

Livingston had been my great-

grandfather's name.

Turning to glance at Ellen, I found her staring at the closed door in astonishment.

"Did you see what I saw?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, rising quickly. "Let's get out of here!"

But before Ellen could even rise from the sofa, Roger Beckwith was back, this time opening the door and passing through it naturally. In his hands he carried a silver tray laden with tea things and small cakes.

When he saw the horrified look on our faces, an expression of chagrin crossed his own. Setting the tray on the coffee table in front of Ellen, he straightened and looked worriedly from one of us to the other.

"Please don't be frightened," he said. "I seem to have pulled a bloomer with that silly door. Stupid of me, but I was excited, not having served tea in nearly a hundred years.

"Now, you know what I am . . . but please don't go. I intend you no harm. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't know how to harm you even if I did intend it."

His expression was so forlorn and his tone so pleading that Ellen burst into laughter. And though I found it a trifle more difficult to suppress a natural reluctance to consort with a ghost, it did seem a trifle absurd to fear this plump,

friendly butler while we sat in a modern living room with sunlight streaming in the window.

Ellen said, "Of course we'll stay, Mr. Beckwith," and calmly began pouring tea.

That was how we met and became friendly with the ghost of Roger Beckwith. And once we became adjusted to the idea of conversing with a ghost, we found him extremely likeable.

He was not at all reticent on the subject of his ghosthood, though he did in a kindly but firm manner refuse to answer certain of our questions regarding the world he inhabited. For example, he quite freely admitted that he was forced to haunt this house as a consequence of losing his life during the commission of a moral wrong, having stolen a bottle of sherry from my great-grandfather and learning only after he had drunk it that great-grandfather had sweetened the wine with a deadly poison. Though it struck me as rather unfair of the authorities in Roger's nether world to exact such a penalty for such a minor sin, he himself seemed to feel it entirely just that his spirit was bound to the house, being unable to proceed outside it for a distance of more than ten feet. But when I inquired the reason for this exact restriction of ten feet, he firmly told me this was a matter he was not at liberty to discuss with mortals.



"I suppose I shall remain here forever," he said with cheerful resignation. "The terms of my penance are that I must wait here until some descendant of Mr. Livingston's visits this house, after which I may attach myself to the descendant for the rest of his life as his personal haunt. When he finally passes on, I will be released and may go to my permanent reward. But, of course, the chance of any descendant of my old employer ever visiting here is remote. The house has been out of the family for nearly a hundred years."

I EXPERIENCED a shiver of thankfulness that I had not disclosed my own relationship to his former employer.

Cautiously I asked, "How would you go about this—ah—haunting, if a descendant did drop in?"

"As helpfully as possible, sir. You see, I bear my poor dead employer no grudge. We were both quite fond of each other, my having served him in England for years before he came to this country, and he would not have harmed me deliberately for the world. The matter of my demise was an accident. He was entirely unaware I had been nipping at the sherry. The poison was meant for his wife."

"My God!" Ellen said. "Mental defectives and uxoricide! What

kind of family have I married into?"

"I beg your pardon?" Roger asked.

"You were saying you would try to haunt as helpfully as possible," I hurriedly put in. "Just what do you mean?"

"Why, I'd try to be of some use, sir. I can't go along with these modern left-wing haunts who insist on running about clanking chains and periodically screaming in their victim's ears. When alive I always voted Tory, and I favor conservatism in haunting too. A friendly ghost could perform many useful services, it seems to me, making the whole relationship much more pleasant."

"What kind of services?" I asked dubiously.

"Why suppose you came home late, sir, and had forgotten your key. If you had me along, in a trice I'd be through the door and shoot the bolt from inside. Or suppose bill collectors kept bothering you? I warrant I could give them such a scare, they would never come back." He smiled sideways at Ellen and emitted a depreciating chuckle to indicate that his next example was to be taken as a joke. "Or suppose your mother-in-law came for a prolonged visit and gave signs of digging in for good. A few discreet groans under her bed might work wonders."

I stared at Ellen and met her eyes staring at me as we both got the same idea at the same time.

I cleared my throat. "I have news for you, Roger. Mr. Livingston was my great-grandfather on my mother's side."

HE gazed at me with his mouth hanging open for some moments before he was able to speak. Then finally an expression of ineffable joy suffused his face.

In a heartfelt voice he said, "Sir, you can't know what this means to me. After all these years I had almost given up hope. You'll never regret it, sir. I'll serve you as faithfully as I did Mr. Livingston. Just mention what you wish done, and the matter will be accomplished."

"I have an aunt," I said. "A somewhat feeble-minded and very superstitious aunt. Ellen and I would both be much happier if she returned to the institution where she spent some years, but for sentimental reasons we can't bring ourselves to commit her. However, if she could be induced to want to return on a voluntary basis . . ."

When I let the sentence hang, he nodded briskly. "I quite understand, sir. I can almost guarantee results. Now if you'll both pardon me a moment, I'll go repeat my good luck."

And he winked out of sight.

Ellen gazed nervously at his chair. "Do you think he'll do things like that often?" she asked.

"We'll get used to it," I said philosophically. "We can get used to anything, if it means getting rid of Aunt Mitzie. Just think, Ellen, we'll be able to live a life of our own!"

In my jubilation I threw my arms around her and gave her an affectionate hug. Then I hastily released her as Roger Beckwith winked back into sight. In his right hand he carried a black bowler hat and in his left a furled umbrella. These two items added such a final touch of down-to-earth respectability to his appearance that it almost seemed absurd to think of him as a ghost.

"Anytime you're ready, sir," he said happily.

DURING the long drive home, Roger explained that most of the time he would remain invisible to us. But he would always be within call, and all I had to do when I wanted him was call his name and he would materialize, eager to serve.

"I won't be a bit of bother," he kept assuring us. "I'll stay out of sight just as much as you wish."

As a matter-of-fact he disappeared before we arrived home, first courteously warning us of his intention so as not to startle us. He would not reappear until we

wanted him, he told us just before he winked out of sight.

It took exactly two nights for Roger to scare Aunt Mitzie into returning to the home for feeble-minded. The first night he waited until she was almost asleep, then groaned from the archway between our two rooms. Even though I knew what it was, the sound sent a shiver along my spine, and it reduced Aunt Mitzie to such terror that she rushed into our room and clung to Ellen.

I had hardly quieted her and tucked her back in bed when Roger acted again. In fact, I was still leaning over her when he emitted an evil chuckle in her ear, causing her to fling her arms about my neck in a strangle-hold which nearly choked me before I could tear it loose. She was in such a state that I let her spend the rest of the night with Ellen and moved into Aunt Mitzie's room myself.

The second night, Roger's disembodied head appeared suspended in the air just inside her room, awakened her by clearing its throat politely and then gravely informed her that it was the ghost of her grandfather's butler come to haunt the apartment.

Again Aunt Mitzie spent the night with Ellen, and the next morning at breakfast announced that she was returning to the home before lunch. Though we pretended consternation at the thought of

getting along without her, we did not make it so strong that her sense of duty would overcome her superstition. On the whole I think we handled the matter very tactfully.

Our final parting was quite touching. Ellen rode along when I drove Aunt Mitzie the twenty miles to the home. After we had registered her and gotten her settled, she clung to both of us and declared she felt she was deserting us.

"But Ellen will be able to take care of you, Don, honey," she said with no assurance in her voice, peering worriedly from my wife to me. "And the minute you get rid of that awful thing in the apartment, I'll come back. You will visit me, won't you, darlings?"

When I told her we would come to see her every Sunday, she seemed to feel a little better—but I confess there was a lump in my throat when we finally left her. Underfoot as she had been, she was my only living relative and I was genuinely fond of her.

AS we prepared for bed that night, however, my only emotion was one of profound relief. For the first time in the weeks since our honeymoon had ended, I felt free in my own home. In jubilant demonstration of our new freedom, I jumped up and down on the bed in my pajamas while

Ellen laughed at me from her dressing table.

"Listen to the springs creak!" I shouted. "And no Aunt Mitzie to come rushing in to protect us from falling out of bed!"

When Ellen switched out the light and climbed in beside me, she lay quietly in my arms for a few moments as we watched silvery moonlight flow through the window and form patterns on the walls.

"In our excitement we haven't even thanked Roger," she remarked.

"We haven't, have we?" Sitting up in bed, I called, "Roger!"

I was startled when he materialized sitting in an easy chair right next to our bed. His bowler and umbrella he had stowed away wherever in the nether world he stored such items, I noticed. He beamed at me cheerfully.

"Thanks a lot, Roger," I said. "About my aunt, I mean."

"You are very welcome, sir. May I do anything for you now?"

"No. Just wanted to thank you."

"Then good night, sir. Good night, madam." And he winked out of sight again.

I lay back and was nestling my head against Ellen's shoulder when a thought occurred to me. I sat up again.

"Roger!" I called softly.

Instantly he reappeared. "Yes, sir?"

"When you pop off like that, where do you go?"

"Nowhere, sir. I just turn invisible."

"And . . . ah . . . when we can't see you, can you still see us?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Even in pitch dark."

I suggested gently, "Don't you think you'd be more comfortable down the hall in the guest room? You would sleep more easily in a bed than a chair."

"Oh, I never sleep, sir. I am quite comfortable."

I began to lose my temper. "Well, you can't sit *there* all night!"

He looked wounded. "I thought you understood, sir," he said in a conciliatory tone. "The same rule applies to you that used to apply to the house. It's impossible for me to get more than ten feet away from you."

With an apologetic smile he winked out of sight again.

I stared at the empty chair in horror.

Leaping out of bed, Ellen grabbed a robe and clasped it about her. Without looking either at me or the empty chair, she started toward Aunt Mitzie's old room with a peculiarly set expression on her face.



Hush!

By

ZENNA HENDERSON

If it's quiet you want

. . . here's how!

JUNE sighed and brushed her hair back from her eyes automatically as she marked her place in her geometry book with one finger and looked through the dining room door at Dubby lying on the front room couch.

"Dubby, please," she pleaded.

Woodcut by DON RICO



"You promised your mother that you'd be quiet tonight. How can you get over your cold if you bounce around making so much noise?"

Dubby's fever-bright eyes peered from behind his tented knees where he was holding a tin truck which he hammered with a toy guitar.

"I am quiet, June. It's the truck that made the noise. See?" And he banged on it again. The guitar splintered explosively and Dubby blinked in surprise. He was wavering between tears at the destruction and pleased laughter for the awful noise it made. Before he could decide, he began to cough, a deep-chested pounding cough that shook his small body unmercifully.

"That's just about enough out of you, Dubby," said June firmly, clearing the couch of toys and twitching the covers straight with a practiced hand. "You have to go to your room in just fifteen minutes anyway . . . or right now if you don't settle down. Your mother will be calling at seven to see if you're okay. I don't want to have to tell her you're worse because you wouldn't be good. Now read your book and keep quiet. I've got work to do."

THERE was a brief silence broken by Dubby's sniffing and June's scurrying pencil. Then

Dubby began to chant:

"Shrimp boatses running a dancer tonight

Shrimp boatses running a dancer tonight

Shrimp boatses running a dancer tonight

SHRIMP BOATses RUNning a DANCer toNIGHT—"

"Dub-by!" called June, frowning over her paper at him.

"That's not noise," protested Dubby. "It's singing. *Shrimp boatses*—" The cough caught him in mid-phrase and June busied herself providing kleenexes and comfort until the spasm spent itself.

"See?" she said. "Your cough thinks it's noise."

"Well, what can I do then?" fretted Dubby, bored by four days in bed and worn out by the racking cough that still shook him. "I can't sing and I can't play. I want something to do."

"Well," June searched the fertile pigeon holes of her baby-sitter's repertoire and came up with an idea that Dubby had once originated himself and dearly loved. "Why not play-like? Play-like a zoo. I think a green giraffe with a mop for a tail and roller skates for feet would be nice, don't you?"

Dubby considered the suggestion solemnly. "If he had egg-beaters for ears," he said, as always overly

conscious of ears, because of the trouble he so often had with his own.

"Of course he does," said June. "Now you play-like one."

"Mine's a lion," said Dubby, after mock consideration. "Only he has a flag for a tail—a pirate flag—and he wears yellow pajamas and airplane wings sticking out of his back and his ears turn like propellers."

"That's a good one," applauded June. "Now mine is an eagle with rainbow wings and roses growing around his neck. And the only thing he ever eats is the song of birds, but the birds are scared of him and so he's hungry nearly all the time—pore ol' iggle!"

Dubby giggled. "Play-like some more," he said, settling back against the pillows.

"No, it's your turn. Why don't you play-like by yourself now? I've just got to get my geometry done."

Dubby's face shadowed and then he grinned. "Okay."

June went back to the table, thankful that Dubby was a nice kid and not like some of the brats she had met in her time. She twined both legs around the legs of her chair, running both hands up through her hair. She paused before tackling the next problem to glance in at Dubby. A worry nudged at her heart as she saw how pale and fine-drawn his fea-

tures were. It seemed, every time she came over, he was more nearly transparent.

She shivered a little as she remembered her mother saying, "Poor child. He'll never have to worry about old age. Have you noticed his eyes, June? He has wisdom in them now that no child should have. He has looked too often into the Valley."

June sighed and turned to her work.

The heating system hummed softly and the out-of-joint day settled into a comfortable accustomed evening.

MRS. Warren rarely ever left Dubby because he was ill so much of the time, and she practically never left him until he was settled for the night. But today when June got home from school, her mother had told her to call Mrs. Warren.

"Oh, June," Mrs. Warren had appealed over the phone, "could you possibly come over right now?"

"Now?" asked June, dismayed, thinking of her hair and nails she'd planned to do, and the tentative date with Larryanne to hear her new Mario Lanza album.

"I hate to ask it," said Mrs. Warren. "I have no patience with people who make last minute arrangements, but Mr. Warren's mother is very ill again and we

just have to go over to her house. We wouldn't trust Dubby with anyone but you. He's got that nasty bronchitis again, so we can't take him with us. I'll get home as soon as I can, even if Orin has to stay. He's home from work right now, waiting for me. So please come, June!"

"Well," June melted to the tears in Mrs. Warren's voice. She could let her hair and nails and Mario go and she could get her geometry done at the Warrens' place. "Well, okay. I'll be right over."

"Ob, bless you, child," cried Mrs. Warren. Her voice faded away from the phone. "Orin, she's coming—" and the receiver clicked.

"JUNE!" He must have called several times before June began to swim back up through the gloomy haze of the new theorem.

"Joo-un!" Dubby's plaintive voice reached down to her and she sighed in exasperation. She had nearly figured out how to work the problem.

"Yes, Dubby." The exaggerated patience in her voice signaled her displeasure to him.

"Well," he faltered, "I don't want to play-like any more. I've used up all my thinkings. Can I make something now? Something for true?"

"Without getting off the couch?" asked June cautiously, wise from past experience.

"Yes," grinned Dubby.

"Without my to-ing and fro-ing to bring you stuff?" she questioned, still wary.

"Uh-huh," giggled Dubby.

"What can you make for true without anything to make it with?" June asked skeptically.

Dubby laughed. "I just thought it up." Then all in one breath, unable to restrain his delight: "It's really kinda like play-like, but I'm going to make something that isn't like anything real so it'll be for true, cause it won't be play-like anything that's real!"

"Huh? Say that again," June challenged. "I bet you can't do it."

Dubby was squirming with excitement. He coughed tentatively, found it wasn't a prelude to a full production and said: "I can't say it again, but I can do it, I betcha. Last time I was sick, I made up some new magic words. They're real good. I betcha they'll work real good like anything."

"Okay, go ahead and make something," said June. "Just so it's quiet."

"Oh, it's *real* quiet," said Dubby in a husky voice. "Enter quiet. I'm going to make a Noise-eater."

"A Noise-eater?"

"Uh-huh!" Dubby's eyes were shining. "It'll eat up all the noises. I can make lotsa racket then, 'cause it'll eat it all up and make it real quiet for you so's you can do your jometry."

"Now that's right thankful of you, podner," drawled June. "Make it a good one, because little boys make a lot of noise."

"Okay." And Duhhy finally calmed down and settled back against his pillows.

THE heating system hummed. The old refrigerator in the kitchen cleared its throat and added its chirking throh to the voice of the house. The mantel clock tocked firmly to itself in the front room. June was absorbed in her homework when a flutter of movement at her elbow jerked her head up.

"Dubby!" she began indignantly.

"Shh!" Duhhy pantomimed, finger to lips, his eyes wide with excitement. He leaned against June, his fever radiating like a small stove through his pajamas and robe. His hreath was heavy with the odor of illness as he put his mouth close to her ear and barely whispered.

"I made it. The Noise-eater. He's asleep now. Don't make a noise or he'll get you."

"I'll get you, too," said June. "Play-like is play-like, but you get right back on that couch!"

"I'm too scared," breathed Dubhy. "What if I cough?"

"You will cough if you—" June started in a normal tone, but Duhhy threw himself into her lap and muffled her mouth with his small

hot hand. He was trembling.

"Don't! Don't!" he begged frantically. "I'm scared. How do you un-play-like? I didn't know it'd work so good!"

There was a *choonk* and a slither in the front room. June strained her ears, alarm stirring in her chest.

"Don't be silly," she whispered. "Play-like isn't for true. There's nothing in there to hurt you."

A sudden succession of musical pings startled June and threw Duhhy back into her arms until she recognized Mrs. Warren's bedroom clock striking seven o'clock—early as usual. There was a soft, drawn-out slither in the front room and then silence.

"Go on, Dubby. Get back on the couch like a nice child. We've played long enough."

"You take me."

June herded him ahead of her, her knees bumping his reluctant back at every step until he got a good look at the whole front room. Then he sighed and relaxed.

"He's gone," he said normally.

"Sure he is," replied June. "Play-like stuff always goes away." She tucked him under his covers. Then, as if hoping to brush his fears—and hers—away, by calmly discussing it, "What did he look like?"

"Well, he had a hody like Mother's vacuum cleaner—the one that lies down on the floor—and

his legs were like my sled, so he could slide on the floor, and he had a nose like the hose on the cleaner only he was able to make it long or short when he wanted to."

Dubby, overstrained, leaned back against his pillows.

The mantel clock began to boom the hour deliberately.

"And he had little eyes like the light inside the refrigerator—"

June heard a *choonk* at the hall door and glanced up. Then with fear-stiffened lips, she continued for him, "And ears like TV antennae because he needs good ears to find the noises." And watched, stunned, as the round metallic body glided across the floor on shiny runners and paused in front of the clock that was deliberating on the sixth stroke.

The long, wrinkly trunklike nose on the front of the thing flashed upward. The end of it shimmered, then melted into the case of the clock. And the seventh stroke never began. There was a soft sucking sound and the nose dropped free. On the mantel, the hands of the clock dropped soundlessly to the bottom of the dial.

IN the tight circle of June's arms, Dubby whimpered. June clapped her hand over his mouth. But his shoulders began to shake and he rolled frantic imploring eyes at her as another coughing spell be-

gan. He couldn't control it.

June tried to muffle the sound with her shoulder, but over the deep, hawking convulsions, she heard the *choonk* and slither of the creature and screamed as she felt it nudge her knee. Then the long snout nuzzled against her shoulder and she heard a soft hiss as it touched the straining throat of the coughing child. She grabbed the horribly vibrating thing and tried to pull it away, but Dubby's cough cut off in mid-spasm.

In the sudden quiet that followed she heard a gurgle like a straw in the bottom of a soda glass and Dubby folded into himself like an empty laundry bag. June tried to straighten him against the pillows, but he slid lazily down.

June stood up slowly. Her dazed eyes wandered trance-like to the clock, then to the couch, then to the horrible thing that lay beside it. Its glowing eyes were blinking and its ears shifting planes . . . probably to locate sound.

Her mouth opened to let out the terror that was constricting her lungs, and her frantic scream coincided with the shrill clamor of the telephone. The Eater hesitated, then slid swiftly toward the repeated ring. In the pause after the party line's four identifying rings, it stopped and June clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes dilated with paralyzed terror.

The ring began again. June

caught Dubby up into her arms and backed slowly toward the front door. The Eater's snout darted out to the telephone and the ring stilled without even an after-resonance.

The latch of the front door gave a rasping click under June's trembling hand. Behind her, she heard the *choonk* and horrible slither as the Eater lost interest in the silenced telephone. She whirled away from the door, staggering off balance under the limp load of Dubby's body. She slipped to one knee, spilling the child to the floor with a thump. The Eater slid toward her, pausing at the hall door, its ears tilting and moving.

June crouched on her knees, staring, one hand caught under Dubby. She swallowed convulsively, then cautiously withdrew her hand. She touched Dubby's bony little chest. There was no movement. She hesitated indecisively, then backed away, eyes intent on the Eater.

Her heart drummed in her burning throat. Her blood roared in her ears. The starched *krunkle* of her wide skirt rattled in the stillness. The fibers of the rug murmured under her knees and toes. She circled wider, wider, the noise only loud enough to hold the Eater's attention—not to attract him to her. She backed guardedly into the corner by the radio. Calculatingly, she reached over and

clicked it on, turning the volume dial as far as it would go.

The Eater slid tentatively toward her at the click of the switch. June backed slowly away, eyes intent on the creature. The sudden insane blare of the radio hit her an almost physical blow. The Eater glided up close against the vibrating cabinet, its snout lifting and drinking in the horrible cacophony of sound.

JUNE lurched for the front door, wrenching frantically at the door knob. She stumbled outside, slamming the door behind her. Trembling, she sank to the top step, wiping the cold sweat from her face with the under side of her skirt. She shivered in the sharp cold, listening to the raucous outpouring from the radio that boomed so loud it was no longer intelligible.

She dragged herself to her feet, pausing irresolutely, looking around at the huddled houses, each set on its own acre of weeds and lawn. They were all dark in the early winter evening.

June gave a little moan and sank on the step again, hugging herself desperately against the penetrating chill. It seemed an eternity that she crouched there before the radio cut off in mid-note.

Fearfully, she roused and pressed her face to one of the door

panes. Dimly through the glass curtains she could see the Eater, sluggish and swollen, lying quietly by the radio. Hysteria was rising for a moment, but she resolutely knuckled the tears from her eyes.

The headlights scythed around the corner, glittering swiftly across the blank windows next door as the car crunched into the Warren's driveway and came to a gravel skittering stop.

June pressed her hands to her mouth, sure that even through the closed door she could hear the *choonk* and slither of the thing inside as it slid to and fro, seeking sound.

The car door slammed and hurried footsteps echoed along the path. June made wild shushing motions with her hands as Mrs. Warren scurried around the corner of the house.

"June!" Mrs. Warren's voice was ragged with worry. "Is Dubby all right? What are you doing out here? What's wrong with the phone?" She fumbled for the door knob.

"No, no!" June shouldered her roughly aside. "Don't go in! It'll get you, too!"

She heard a thud just inside the door. Dimly through the glass she saw the flicker of movement as the snout of the Eater raised and wavered toward them.

"June!" Mrs. Warren jerked her away from the door. "Let me in!

What's the matter? Have you gone crazy?"

Mrs. Warren stopped suddenly, her face whitening. "*What have you done to Dubby, June?*"

THE girl gulped with the shock of the accusation. "I haven't done anything, Mrs. Warren. He made a Noise-eater, and it—it—" June winced away from the sudden blaze of Mrs. Warren's eyes.

"Get away from that door!" Mrs. Warren's face was that of a stranger, her words icy and clipped. "I trusted you with my child. If anything has happened to him—"

"Don't go in—oh, don't go in!" June grabbed at her coat hysterically. "Please, please wait! Let's get—"

"Let go!" Mrs. Warren's voice grated between her tightly clenched teeth. "Let me go, you—you—" Her hand flashed out and the crack of her palm against June's cheek was echoed by a *choonk* inside the house. June was staggered by the blow, but she clung to the coat until Mrs. Warren pushed her sprawling down the front steps and fumbled at the knob, crying, "Dubby! Dubby!"

June, scrambling up the steps on hands and knees, caught a glimpse of a hovering something that lifted and swayed like a waiting cobra. It was slapped aside by the violent opening of the door as

Mrs. Warren stumbled into the house, her cries suddenly stilling on her slack lips as she saw her crumpled son by the couch.

She gasped and whispered, "Dubby!" She lifted him into her arms. His head rolled loosely against her shoulder. Her protesting, "No, no, no!" merged into half-articulate screams as she hugged him to her.

And from behind the front door there was a *choonk* and a *slither*.

June lunged forward and grabbed the reaching thing that was homing in on Mrs. Warren's hysterical grief. Her hands closed around it convulsively, her whole weight dragging backward, but it had a strength she couldn't match. Desperately then, her fists clenched, her eyes tight shut, she screamed and screamed and screamed.

The snout looped almost lazily around her straining throat, but she fought her way almost to the front door before the thing held her, feet on the floor, body at an impossible angle and stilled her frantic screams, quieted her straining lungs and sipped the last of her heartbeats, and let her drop.

Mrs. Warren stared incredulously at June's crumpled body and the horrible creature that blinked its lights and shifted its antennae questingly. With a muffled gasp, she sagged, knees and waist and neck, and fell soundlessly to the floor.

The refrigerator in the kitchen cleared its throat and the Eater turned from June with a *choonk* and slid away, crossing to the kitchen.

The Eater retracted its snout and slid back from the silent refrigerator. It lay quietly, its ears shifting from quarter to quarter.

The thermostat in the dining room clicked and the hot air furnace began to hum. The Eater slid to the wall under the register that was set just below the ceiling. Its snout extended and lifted and narrowed until the end of it slipped through one of the register openings. The furnace hum choked off abruptly and the snout end flipped back into sight.

Then there was quiet, deep and unbroken until the Eater tilted its ears and slid up to Mrs. Warren.

In such silence, even a pulse was noise.

There was a sound like a straw in the bottom of a soda glass.

A stillness was broken by the shrilling of a siren on the main highway four blocks away.

A *choonk* and a *slither* and the metallic bump of runners down the three front steps.

And a quiet, quiet house on a quiet side street.

Hush.

Zenna Henderson

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It was a new and frightening angle to the eternal triangle: husband, housewife, and . . .

House . . . Wife

By **BOYD ELLANBY**

UNTIL that Saturday afternoon in August, Iris was not even uneasy.

She felt only the normal concern of the harassed young housekeeper as she watched the television repairman on his knees with his ear to the cabinet, head cocked, listening. He moved the dial an eighth of an inch to the right, and immediately the flickering waves on the screen solidified into the

scene of a ballet. At the foot of dark mountains, feather-capped dancers glided in the patterned figures of *Swan Lake*, and music flowed into the living room.

"But I don't understand it, Eric!" said Iris.

She looked at her husband. He was leaning against the mantel by the fireplace, eyes closed, his sullen mouth slowly relaxing into a smile. She was astonished to see



Illustrated by SALE

HOUSE...WIFE

how quickly the music was smoothing the petulance from his face, and for the first time she was vaguely alarmed.

THE repairman stood up, flicked off the switch, and thoughtfully dusted his trousers as *Swan Lake* faded and the music died. "I don't see what you folks keep complaining about, Mr. Beauchamp," he said. "This TV set is in perfect condition, and so is the radio."

Eric opened his eyes. "It does seem to be all right. But Mrs. Beauchamp insists that it's been behaving very oddly, and that it frequently picks up the wrong station."

"Well," said Mr. Braun indulgently. "Lots of times I've been called out to adjust things that didn't need it, just because the lady of the house got excited and forgot to punch the right button."

"I was *not* excited," said Iris. "I was perfectly calm, until that thing—"

"Now, now," said Mr. Braun. "Ever have any trouble with it yourself, Mr. Beauchamp?"

"No. When I use it, it always works perfectly. But of course I only turn it on once in a while in the evening, or maybe over weekends. And even weekends, I'm mostly upstairs at my painting, and I don't pay much attention to the programs."

"That so?" said Mr. Braun, put-

ting his tools back in their case. "Painter, are you?"

"Only on holidays. But I think I may flatter myself that, even so, my work isn't too bad."

Eric had changed, Iris thought. A few months ago he wouldn't have sided against her in an argument with a repairman, and he wouldn't have worn that smug smile in speaking of his work. Once, at least, he had painted honestly; but the pictures he was turning out now were as pretty and as meaningless as the ones you saw on calendars.

But Mr. Braun seemed impressed. "I've always thought I'd like to be a painter myself, if I only had the time. What do you paint?"

"Portraits and figures, mostly."

"Why, Eric?" said Iris.

He scowled at her. "What do you mean, 'Why, Eric'? Do you have to object to everything I say? I paint portraits and figures."

"All I meant was, you don't any more. It's been weeks since you asked me to pose for you."

HE ignored her, turning to Mr. Braun. "Well, just recently, as a matter of fact, I've been doing landscapes. They're easier when you don't have many free hours, and the company keeps me pretty busy except for Saturdays and Sundays."

"And when you get started

painting, you don't even hear the radio," said Iris. "But I'd like to be able to have it on during the day."

"Can't find a thing wrong with it, TV or radio," said the repairman. "Try it for yourself, Mrs. Beauchamp, and let's see how you handle it."

Iris turned the switch. Again the music sounded clearly, and white-gowned dancers emerged to glide on in their graceful routine.

She could feel her face burning.

"I don't know how to explain it, Eric. Something always seems to go wrong. This set is working all right now, but when you're away at the plant and I'm here all alone, I swear sometimes it simply goes crazy—especially when I play the radio by itself. It doesn't play what the papers have scheduled—the stations get mixed up. When I start to dust in the morning, feeling happy and in a mood to sing, I usually look for a station that's offering lively, gay music. But likely as not I get a program consisting of Gregorian chants, or quarter-tone stuff that drives me right out of the house. Or if I feel like reading poetry after my work's done in the afternoon, I tune in expecting to hear a Bach organ fugue, for example—and what do I get? A third-rate disc jockey playing a jig or a polka or a waltz so infectious that all I can think of is *one-two-three, one-two-three*."

Neither Eric nor Mr. Braun commented, but the way they looked at her made her angry. Twisting away from their skeptical eyes, she was startled by her reflection in the wall mirror. Ordinarily she was a pretty girl, she knew, with gleaming black hair banged straight across her forehead, her gray eyes wide under long lashes, her mouth a full curve. But now her frown seemed to shadow her whole face, to narrow her eyes, turn her skin sallow, and make even her red lips seem thin and uninviting.

SHIVERING, she turned off the set and stared at the men defiantly. "Do you think I'm imagining it?"

Mr. Braun lit a cigarette and looked around uncertainly.

"An ash tray?" said Iris. "Now where? . . . Just this morning I put one . . ." Reaching behind the cushion of a chair, she drew out a copper tray and handed it to Mr. Braun. "They're always disappearing," she said. "They do slip off so easily."

Mr. Braun took a meditative puff. He said slowly, "Now look here, Mrs. Beauchamp. This is the third time you've called me out here to adjust the TV combination, and this is the third time it doesn't need a thing. To say nothing of the minor complaints you keep making, like the time the

vacuum cleaner wouldn't give you any suction, and it turned out the hose was plugged up. I don't know what the Housing clerk is going to say to me when he finds your name on my time sheet again."

"But things keep getting out of order!"

"Or maybe you're not used to keeping house," Mr. Braun said. "Maybe you'd be happier back at the hotel, where there're lots of people. The company wants its employees to be happy here, and nobody's forcing you to keep house. When they moved the plant out here to Concordton, they knew they'd have a housing problem—that's why they built the hotel, and why they took over all these old houses and went to the trouble of modernizing them. But there still aren't enough houses to go around, and you folks are lucky to have been assigned one so soon."

"That's what we thought," said Iris; "but I never expected a house to give me so much trouble."

Mr. Braun sighed. "For the life of me, I don't see how you can keep finding fault. Of course, this is an old house, but it's a lot better than these cracker boxes they put up nowadays. Take the things in this living room, now. Those old rockers and the sofa and tables have been here since the place was built, and you won't find anything better outside an antique show. You've got an authentic old

New England cottage, but fixed up with every modern convenience from indoor plumbing to air conditioning. These old Colonial houses were well made, and they're still sound, as tough as the people that built them. Take this one, for instance . . ."

HE looked around at the Persian prayer rugs and the red Bokharas scattered over the wide boards of the floor, at the many-paned windows, the red brick fireplace with the dutch ovens at the sides, the pine rafters of the ceiling.

"From looking at her, I'd say she might have been built—oh, say two, maybe three hundred years ago, for the wife of a Boston sea captain, or maybe a whaler. Life wasn't easy in those days, and people thought it was practically a sin to laugh out loud, but they couldn't see any harm in being comfortable when they could afford it. Matter of fact, this house'll probably outlast some of the gadgets that the company put in her. Your furnace work all right?"

"I suppose so," said Iris. "We only moved in at the beginning of the summer."

Her head was aching. She wished the man would stop lecturing, pick up his bag, and go away, and give her a chance to talk things out with Eric.

"Air conditioner reliable?"

She nodded.

"How about the kitchen equipment? Electric stove okay? Oven thermostat set properly?"

"I guess so. But it's hard to get used to the stove. I never claimed to be the world's best cook, but I seem to get worse instead of better. Half the time the meals I turn out aren't even a reasonable facsimile of the ones I was trying to make. The hollandaise sauce gets scorched, or the turkey is underdone."

"Be reasonable!" Eric burst out. "You can't blame the stove for that! Listen to what happened just last week, Mr. Braun. I'd particularly asked to have baked beans that night, and I even looked up an old New England recipe for her to use. Well, around dinner time we smelled smoke. We rushed to the kitchen and dragged the bean pot out of the oven, but it was too late. They were a smoking mess, burned to a crisp, and there was nothing to be done with them but dump them in the disposal. And why? She said the thermostat was wacky. I say she forgot to keep adding water. Result, no dinner. Then I took over, and I produced a cheese soufflé that was straight out of Escoffier! And she blames the oven!"

"THAT'S not the only thing," said Iris. "Even you will have to admit that the dishwasher

breaks a good many dishes. I hardly dare use my good china any more, and my wedding silver is badly scratched."

"Any dishwasher'll break a few dishes now and then unless you use plastic," said Mr. Braun. "Doesn't mean a thing. You just have to be careful how you stack them. Any other complaints before I leave?"

Iris rubbed her forehead, frowning. "There was something else . . . Help me remember, Eric. What else was it needed fixing?"

"Nothing! I don't think we should waste any more of Mr. Braun's time."

"If you can't think of it, it can't be too important," said Mr. Braun. "Now, I don't want to be too rough on you, ma'am. Lots of women get nervous, lonesome-like, being away from the city for the first time—but they just have to get used to living in a village. You haven't been here very long, have you?"

Iris's lips were quivering so that she did not dare answer. She shook her head, feeling thoroughly browbeaten.

"Only a few months," said Eric. "I joined the company in June, right after I got my doctorate."

"Then you're lucky to have this place at all, being newcomers. Why, some people have to wait more than a year before the Housing bureau can locate them. And yet you complain about your

radio and everything else."

He moved toward the door. "Well, Mrs. Beauchamp, I hate to say this, but I'll tell you frankly—I'm not coming out here again. If you can't learn to adapt yourself, the best thing for you to do is move back to the hotel, because Housing has a waiting list a mile long of people who'd jump at the chance to have your place. You want to cancel your lease?"

"Yes! Oh, Eric, let's move out!"

"Move? I should say not!" His eyes were angrier than she had ever seen them. "In the four years we've been married, we've lived in one cramped little shoebox after another, with no privacy and hardly room to swing a cat. I'm sick of it. This is the most comfortable place we've ever had. It suits me fine. We're staying!"

"That's the spirit, Mr. Beauchamp," said the repairman. "It doesn't pay to coddle nerves. Well, I'll be going now, and let you get back to that painting. Got a fine view of the woods from here. Maybe some Sunday I'll come out and have a try at it myself."

WHEN the door had closed, Iris sat down, too disturbed to think clearly. Waiting for Eric to speak, she watched him stride about the room, looking at anything rather than her.

The late afternoon sun coming through the window turned his yel-

low hair to gold, and highlighted the planes of his face to the rugged nobility of a bronze hero, as he prowled from the fireplace to the TV cabinet, back to the fireplace, and over again to the window whose starched white curtains, neatly belled at the sides, gave an odd air of primness to such a pretty room. As he stared through the window at the pine woods beyond, his fingers drummed against the glass to evoke a drone like the purr of a stroked cat.

"Look here, Iris," he said abruptly. "Do you know what's the matter with you?"

"No. Do you?"

"Yes, I do. You won't like to admit it, but here's the truth . . . you're jealous."

"Jealous? Of whom?"

"Of me! You're jealous simply because it was me who found this house, and not you. That's why you keep finding fault with it—because your silly pride is hurt. Well, you'll have to get over it, that's all. We're more comfortable here than we've ever been in our lives, except when you spoil it all with your complaining, and I'm not going to give it up just to please you. You tried to find a house for us, and couldn't. Then I went househunting, and here it was, waiting like a ripe cherry, ready to fall into my hands. So you turn into a jealous female, and I must say it doesn't make you

any more attractive."

Iris was too stunned to reply. She lit a cigarette, but it tasted stale. Snuffing it out, she dropped her hands to her lap.

"And now I'm going to try to get a little painting done," said Eric. "You've already made me waste half the afternoon on this business. *Some* wives would show a little consideration for their husbands!"

AFTER the door slammed, Iris sat on alone, trying to understand what was happening.

Until lately, Eric had been as affectionate a husband as a girl could want: light-hearted, amiable, full of jokes. He even had a pet name for her—"my little pigeon," he used to call her. Now, her very presence seemed to irritate him.

Was Eric right? she wondered. Was it jealousy that made her dislike the house? No, that was ridiculous; it was something else, something she could not quite recognize.

The sun moved lower in the sky; the beam of light which had made the room seem snug shifted from the window, and the air was colder.

She considered the room she sat in, and reluctantly admitted the truth. It made her feel ill at ease, as though she were an uninvited guest in a stranger's house. She had never liked the way the

furniture stood, of course, but she had never been able to rearrange it in a way that seemed pleasing. The stiff white curtains, too, seemed to drain the life from the room; but though she had twice replaced them with brightly colored draperies, they had all faded so quickly that in the end she had been forced to go back to white.

But it was not the furniture alone that made her feel unwelcome.

She had never heard the house so still. As the minutes crept by, the silence became so inimical that she wanted to scream, just to hear a recognizable noise.

Perhaps if she could get *Swan Lake* again . . .

She sat up suddenly. The radio! Staring at the mute cabinet, she stood up, crept forward on tiptoe, and paused before the dial. Tentatively, she raised her hand, hesitated, then quickly turned the switch.

A wail of disharmony shrieked into the room, battering at her mind with the implacable force of a wild northeaster. She clapped her hands to her ears, but the sound blasted against her skin like cold sharp sleet driven by a furious wind. Gasping, she flicked off the set. The silence terrified her. She whirled toward the door and stumbled out of the room, out of the house, and into the garden where she sank down under the maple

tree, with her back to the house.

So Mr. Braun insisted that everything was all right? And Eric thought her a jealous, neurotic, fool of a woman?

She was beginning to understand. Until this afternoon she had been an ordinary, conventional young housewife, secure in a commonplace world. But now, as her mind checked back over the past few weeks and assembled data and arranged patterns, she watched her world shift and reform into a monstrous shape which was—reality.

Feeling dizzy, she rested her head on her knees.

So Eric had found the house waiting for them, like a ripe cherry? No—it had not been waiting for Mr. and Mrs. Beauchamp. It had not counted on Iris at all. It had seen Eric and wanted him, but Mrs. Beauchamp had been a surprise. And now it meant to drive her out.

She remembered the day he had found the place, nearly three months ago.

*
IRIS had been asleep in their room at the company hotel, exhausted by days of futile house-hunting, when Eric clattered in triumphantly:

"Wake up, Iris! I've found us a house!"

"Then you must be a magician," she said drowsily. "What charm

did you use, darling?"

"Nothing but my bright blue eyes!"

"Tell me!"

He had been strolling through the quaint, old-fashioned streets of Concordton, he said, admiring the trim houses behind their neat white fences. He'd got close to the edge of town, where the woods began, and was turning to go back when he noticed the house. The moment he saw it, with the afternoon sun winking from its windows, he had known it was exactly what they wanted. He had hardly dared believe his luck when he found the sign, half hidden by the bushes at the gate: TO LET, TO RIGHT PARTY.

The house stood apart from its neighbors, a prim little two-and-a-half story white cottage, set in a garden ornamented with pink roses and bleeding-hearts, and rows of pink hollyhocks bordering the path to the door.

The gate in the picket fence opened at his touch, and he had walked into the garden and around the house. Green shutters bracketed the windows, through which he could glimpse the starched curtains, the cushioned rocking chairs, the stone hearth before the fireplace. The second floor was many-windowed, and in the sloping roof of the attic there was even a skylight to make it ideal for his painting.

He had rushed back to the company's Housing bureau, afraid to risk delaying even the extra hour it would have taken to go back for Iris and get her approval.

Now, chuckling, he repeated to Iris his conversation with the skeptical Housing clerk:

"'You again, Mr. Beauchamp? We haven't a thing for you . . . *Where* did you say this house is? . . . But I'm absolutely positive there isn't . . . But it's not on our list! . . . Very well, we'll check with our master file if you insist, but I tell you again . . . H'm . . . Well, now, *that's* odd!'

"'Then it is for rent?'

"'Apparently it is, though how it was overlooked when this list was compiled is more than . . . Why, if you hadn't called our attention to it the place might have sat there empty for goodness knows how many years!'

"'You mean I can have it?'

"'I hardly know what to say, Mr. Beauchamp. Your name's near the bottom of our waiting list, of course—but since you found it by your own initiative . . .'

"'And that was that!' Eric concluded. "Want to see the lease?"

She was glowing. "Eric, you're wonderful! When can we move in? It sounds perfect, with a garden, and all the north woods for our back yard. Wait a minute! *Where* did you say this place is?"

"You sound just like that clerk,"

said Eric. "I told you. On Maple Lane."

"It can't be! I canvassed that street myself, two days ago—there wasn't a single vacancy sign!"

He grinned at her, smugly: "You just overlooked it, my little pigeon. Obviously, it needed a man."

And so it had, Iris thought . . . but you put it the wrong way around, Eric.

You didn't find the house. It—*she*—found you!

IT was nearly dark when she stood up and brushed her skirt. Slowly, she walked up the path to the front door, turned the knob, and entered the living room. The reflection of her face in the mirror was a shadowed distortion; she ignored it and sat down in the gathering dusk, still thinking.

Above, she heard the door of Eric's studio open, heard him on the stairs, and then in the library next to the living room.

The house was her enemy. And the house was not neuter. The house was a woman who meant to take Eric and to evict his wife.

Iris tried to picture her: a middle-aged, tight-lipped pioneer housewife, who had tried to deny her body's curves by hiding them in boned corsets. A woman afraid of passion—she had allowed herself pink roses in her garden, but there were no red ones. An avid

woman who made her house an embrace, and evaded self-reproach by curtaining her windows in starched, uncompromising white. She must be a widow; perhaps the widow of a sea captain, alone for months at a time, and then left alone forever, still unsatisfied, with nothing but her house. A woman unyielding in her virtue, but tormented by an urge to—to mother attractive young men?

The room was quite dark. Iris straightened her shoulders and switched on the reading lamp. Now that she realized what threatened her, she thought, it ought not be difficult to fight back—and to win. The house was a formidable personality; but what was a thing of wood and stone against a live, warm woman?

First, she must decide how to defend herself.

There was no use appealing to Eric; the house had made that impossible. With sly female subtlety, it had contrived by tampering with the radio, the oven thermostat, the dishwasher, to discredit Iris completely. No, she could not confide in Eric.

But she could try to re-establish an atmosphere of friendliness. Eric spoke so often of the comfort of the house. Well, she would make him comfortable herself, in ways she had been neglecting. Tonight, she would bring him his slippers, and light his cigarette, and . . .

No, she hadn't realized it before, but it had been weeks since he had smoked.

Well, she would offer him a drink, then, and she would stop complaining. As for the radio, she would not use it. As for the kitchen, she would not use the oven, and she would use plastic dishes.

And most important of all, she must be alert to counter the tricks of the house, and not let herself be maneuvered into a situation which would show her to disadvantage.

Iris smiled. She was no longer the unwary wife, she assured herself: She had been warned.

HEARING Eric in the next room, she felt safe from attack for the moment, knowing that the house was always on its best behavior when he was there to notice. Almost as a deliberate challenge, she walked to the cabinet and dialed her favorite station, smiling as the radio docilely began to play the Brahms-Handel variations, exactly as the paper had listed.

When Eric came into the room, she was relieved to see that he was no longer angry.

"Nice music," he remarked. "Have you started dinner yet?"

"Not yet. It won't take me ten minutes. Why don't we relax a while first? Let's have a drink before dinner, the way we used to."

"If you want one," said Eric.

"Will you fix them? I'll have a Martini, as usual."

She followed him into the kitchen and waited as he opened the freezing compartment of the refrigerator.

"Damn!" said Eric.

"What's the matter?"

"No ice. You've been defrosting again."

"But I haven't! I defrosted on Wednesday."

"You can see for yourself, Iris, there's no ice."

The trays were full of water; the whole icebox was at room temperature.

Then she remembered: "Oh, Eric! That's what—"

He interrupted angrily. "Every time I want some ice, it turns out there isn't any because you've been defrosting. The same thing happened nearly a month ago, when I tried to fix a drink. I notice there's always ice when you want iced tea, and the refrigeration is perfect when you want ice cream—but when I want ice, the cubes are always melted! You'd almost think it was done on purpose."

"It was not!" she flared. "You know very well that crazy icebox does it all by itself. Remember this afternoon, when Mr. Braun asked if there was anything else that needed fixing? It was the refrigerator I was trying to remember to tell him about!"

"Then why didn't you tell him? What made you forget?"

Stalking back to the living room, he slipped off his sandals and propped his feet onto a cushion. She followed angrily.

"You're getting to be a careless housekeeper, Iris. You admit that the defroster has been erratic ever since we've been here, and yet you've done nothing about it. You'd think that in more than two months' time, with nothing to do but take care of a house that practically runs itself, you could at least get the icebox fixed."

He settled lower in his chair, yawning.

IRIS tried to keep calm. "I'm sorry Eric. Couldn't we do without ice for once? Bourbon and branch water isn't bad."

"You mean you still want a drink?"

"Of course I do."

"Then why can't you take the trouble to get the refrigerator repaired?"

"I will get it repaired—but I can't do it tonight! What's the matter with you, Eric? I'd never have believed the day would come when I'd have to coax you into being my drinking partner!"

"Nagging again!" he said.

Iris was alarmed. She had not meant to quarrel. Placatingly, she put her hand on his. "Sorry, Eric. I'd forgotten how tired you must

be, after several hours of work. You sit here and take it easy, and I'll fix us some Bourbon."

Shaking his head sulkily, he shuffled his feet back into his sandals. "No, you asked for Martinis, and that's what you're going to get."

"Then I'll come along to keep you company."

Following him into the kitchen, she perched gaily on the table, swinging the shapely legs he had always admired, hoping he would notice them again; but he was intent only on mixing the drinks.

Methodically he assembled the ingredients: glasses, bottles, bit-
ters, shaker, olives, ranged in a neat row on the shelf. Holding the jigger up to eye level, he squinted as he poured. The jigger filled to the brim, suddenly overflowed, and splashed from Iris's swinging legs onto the floor.

"Damn!" said Eric.

"Your technique seems to be showing," she said, mopping at her legs.

"You'd make anybody nervous, watching like that!"

Without comment, she got out the mop and dried the floor.

Doggedly, he emptied the jigger into the sink, rinsed it, dried it, gripped the bottle tightly, and began to pour again.

Crash! The bottle slipped from his hands, bounced against the sink and smashed on the floor, the

shattered glass glimmering in a spreading lake of gin.

Staring down at the wet pieces, Eric looked as astonished as a small boy who has been slapped without warning for a crime he did not commit.

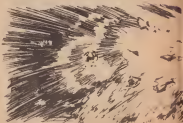
SHE tried not to laugh as she got out the broom and dustpan. "Don't look so upset, Eric. Your hand must have been wet. Get another bottle and stop worrying."

Bringing out a second bottle, he uncapped it and poured. His hands were trembling so that she was scarcely surprised when it, too, crashed to the floor.

"I didn't want a drink anyway!" he shouted. "A drink's no good without ice! If you want one, fix it yourself!"

"There's one more bottle," she said. "I'll try."

This time, the bottle behaved normally. She ignored his resentful expression as she performed the





rite, arranged the tray, and carried it into the living room. There she softened the lights, tuned in a program of Strauss waltzes, and sat down beside him to sip her drink.

Eric was right, she mused. This was a comfortable house, if it could just be kept in its place. And that should be a simple matter. It was only a question of who was to be mistress, that was all. Silly of her to have been so frightened this afternoon.

Absently, she held out her glass for a refill, lulled by the sentimentality of the music, not noticing Eric's silence.

"I'm ready for another," she said dreamily. "Will you—Why, Eric! You haven't touched your drink!"

"No. I'm not going to."

"But why not?"

"I told you in the first place I didn't want one."

"But I didn't think you were serious!"

"You didn't care whether I was serious or not. I come down after an afternoon's hard work, tired and hungry, and you insist on carousing. Have you even started dinner yet?"

"It's all cooked. It can be heated in ten minutes time, and the salad is all ready for the dressing. Is there any rush? You always used to enjoy the cocktail hour so much, I didn't think you'd mind

delaying a while. I didn't realize you were *that* hungry."

His eyes were accusing, his voice bitter: "I don't ask much of my wife, Iris. I'm not an unreasonable man, I hope. This house has no many conveniences that you have very little to do. But you neglect even that little! Apparently you think more of your liquor than you do of your husband. Is it too much for a man to ask his wife to keep sober enough to remember to cook his dinner?"

The lilting melody of *One Heart, One Mind* galloped derisively through the room, nudging her mind with treacherous sweetness, taunting her, as Iris studied her husband's grim face. She tried to control herself, but the mocking waltz unnerved her.

"You've changed, my dear," she said tauntly. "That wasn't a nice thing to say, even as a joke."

"I'm not joking. I'm just stating an obvious fact. And apparently I must remind you that I'm still hungry."

Deliberately, she reached across him for the shaker.

"Fix your own dinner," she heard herself saying, hardly believing what she heard. "Get your own dinner! I'm going to get drunk!"

IRIS was alone in the bed. She turned her head to avoid the light of the morning sun stabbing

through the window, and winced with the pain. Eyes closed, she tried to remember. Last night . . . the drinks . . . the waltz . . . the fight . . .

You've won another round, she thought drearily. You, you—unscrupulous antediluvian predator!

It had seemed a wonderful idea to show Eric that his wife wanted to make him comfortable; but she seemed to have emerged from the demonstration cast in the role of a dipsomaniac, a sore trial to a water-drinking husband. That was especially odd, for Eric had always been a more enthusiastic tippler than she . . .

Sudden illumination made her sit up.

So *that* was the answer!

Quickly, she ran over the data: the refrigerator which would let you have ice for tea or ice cream, but which defrosted itself when asked to provide ice for cocktails or highballs; her inability to remember to mention it to Mr. Braun on his frequent visits; the smashed gin bottles; Eric's self-righteous refusal of his drink.

Of course!

This was an early New England home.

The house was a teetotaler.

It approved of comfort, of a sort. Witness the cheerful living room, the flowers in the garden. But it was a Puritan. Witness the vanishing ash trays, the quick fad-

ing of the colored draperies, the way the dishwasher broke her pretty frivolous dishes.

Decent comfort, decreed the house, but no self-indulgence. No tobacco. No liquor.

The house wasn't content with taking Eric away from her—it intended to reform him as well. It would take care of him; but it was a prudish house, and would not permit him any pleasures it considered to be immoral.

Iris thought nostalgically of the gay young man she had married, his sprightliness, his easy tolerance of human frailty; and then forced herself to envisage the complacent, strait-laced posturer he was becoming. She shuddered.

You may get him yet, she thought grimly. But not without a fight, ma'am. Not without a fight!

Jumping out of bed, she hastily put on some lipstick, threw on her robe, ran down the stairs . . . and stopped in the doorway.

The morning sun sparkled through the window onto the breakfast table where Eric sat, stirring his coffee, munching toast. His yellow hair was gold in the sunlight, his blue eyes wide with abstraction, the rugged features of his face were smoothly peaceful.

He didn't even miss her, she thought. He looked utterly contented with the companionship of the cozy breakfast nook, the blue morning-glories of the window cur-

tains, the winking silver of the coffee pot.

THE clatter of her mules as she walked to the table shattered the peace of the room.

He put down his spoon, frowning. "You're late, Iris."

"I know. I'm sorry." She sat down.

He eyed her critically. "Your hair's not combed."

"I know, darling. I was in such a hurry to get down to you and tell you I'm sorry about last night."

"And your robe isn't properly fastened. The collar's all wrinkled, and your skin shows through."

"Does it?" She smiled placatingly and held out her cup. "You know what you look like? You look exactly like a freshly scrubbed, mischievous cherub of a boy—the kind old ladies smile at in the streets, and want to pat on the head. I'm sorry I made you cross by sleeping so late, but I didn't think it mattered on a Sunday. Why didn't you call me?"

"I did call you," he said, reaching for the coffee pot. "I called you three times, but you pretended not to hear me."

"Pretended? But I didn't hear you! You know, Eric . . . this makes several times now that you've called to me and I haven't heard you. Do you think maybe there's something wrong with the acoustics of this place?"

"Always complaining about the house! Always finding fault with it one way or another!" Petulantly, he tilted the pot over her extended cup.

The amber stream struck the rim, and at the automatic jerk of his hand, hot coffee splashed over the table and onto Iris.

She jumped up, trying to laugh. "Are you trying to scald me to death? Just look at my robe!"

"That's right, blame everybody but yourself!" he said, slamming down the pot. "Blame the acoustics because you're sound asleep, blame me because you've got such a hangover you can't hold your cup steady. You wobble it all over the table and then complain because I can't follow it around with a pot of hot coffee. I never liked that robe anyway!"

Tears filled her eyes as she stared at him, open-mouthed. "Why Eric! This is your favorite robe! Remember, when we were in Paris on our honeymoon, how you used to tell me I looked just like a red rose in it, and I should always have one just like it?"

"Then I must have been crazy."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's too bright. Somehow, in this light, it's sleazy and flashy, cheap looking."

Iris fingered the stained robe, her mouth quivering. With sudden fury she tore it open, ripped it off her body, flung it to the floor.

"I'll never wear it again, then. I'll never wear it again!"

HE looked away, fidgeting. "That suits me fine—but you might at least put on something to cover yourself. You can't stay here like this without a stitch on except that gaudy lipstick."

"Why not?"

"Well . . . it's indecent."

"Eric Beau—" she began, then stopped.

She looked down at herself, at the rosy curves of the slender body he had always admired so much. Never before had she felt naked and embarrassed in his presence. Frantically, she looked for something to cover her. The curtains! Running to the window, she ripped the flowered cloth from the rods, wrapped it around herself, and returned miserably to the table.

The house is cleverer than I am, she thought despondently. I've lost another round. Last night I was exhibited to my husband in the role of a dipsomaniac. This morning I seem to be cast as a bawd. But how did a Puritan widow of strict moral principles ever learn to fight so shrewdly? How can I fight back? Am I going to be thrown out in spite of anything I can do? Is that sanctimonious old vixen going to steal my husband completely, and turn him into a nasty-minded, puritanical, comfort-loving prig?

What can I do about it?

There was always the hotel, of course; or she could go home to her parents. But without Eric?

She could not bear the thought. She began to cry, silently, deeply, tears rushing into her eyes and throat, choking her so that she could not even swallow the fresh coffee he had poured for her.

Presently she felt his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Iris. I didn't mean to hurt you. Let's be friends again."

She could only sob as he bent to touch her forehead.

"I didn't mean to make you feel bad," he said again. "Let's do something together. I'll tell you what—you haven't posed for me in a long while. Will you? The way you used to?"

"Are you serious?" she whispered incredulously.

"Yes, I'm serious. I don't know what gets into me, sometimes. But let's forget it now, and I'll get some painting done."

"But what about your landscape?"

"Not today," he said, grinning. "Today I'll do me a nude."

THE day went so well that Iris could hardly believe it was not a dream. Reclining on the couch in the big room under the skylight, her flesh round and rosy against the rich yellow brocade he had draped as a background, she

made herself be unobtrusive as Eric set to work.

He whistled as he put canvas on easel and squeezed color from tubes onto palette. Eying her thoughtfully, he arranged her pose, smiled when she got it just right, and then began blocking in the areas of dark and light on the canvas.

"Comfortable?" he said once.

"Mmmmm."

"My favorite model. Can't think why I've neglected her for so long."

Is it going to be as easy as this? thought Iris. What had happened? This morning she had been practically beaten. All her attempts to neutralize the blandishments of the house had boomeranged . . . until an hour ago. And what had happened then? She had only begun to cry. And Eric had been concerned about her feelings for the first time in weeks. Did this mean that to conquer the woman that was the house, she had only to act—and be—the woman she herself was? Was that all?

The day passed in friendliness. Eric was obviously pleased with his painting as he set it aside to be resumed the following weekend, and before they left the room he took the innocuous "View of the Pines" of the day before and carelessly turned it to the wall.

There were no unpleasant incidents all that week, not even when Eric was away at work and

she was alone in the house. She was still wary, however, and did not risk her luck too far: She stored her frivolous china dishes on the top shelf of the cupboard and replaced them with plain blue plastic; she planned meals that did not require the oven; and she took care never to turn on the radio or TV unless Eric was in the room. Dutifully she brushed her hair each morning before going down to breakfast, and even in the privacy of their bedroom she kept her body hidden in a dark blue long-sleeved robe whose neckline was decorously high.

It was a calm week, without a single quarrel, and she shut her eyes to the knowledge that it was rather dull. Without further discussion, both Beauchamps were now non-smokers and non-drinkers. Conversation at table was genteel, if not animated. Each evening they sat sedately in the living room and read until half-past nine, at which time Eric yawned, turned out the lights, and led the way to bed. As the week came to a close without aggressive action from any part of the house, Iris was elated, for she had thought of a plan—a plan to rescue Eric.

SUNDAY was another agreeable morning. They had toast and one cup of coffee each (more than one, Eric had announced recently, was bad for the health);

and after breakfast they went up to the studio.

Modestly, Iris kept her robe on until the moment he was ready for her to pose, then resumed her position against the yellow brocade. It was difficult for her to keep her breath coming slowly and evenly, she was so excited. Eric had been so amiable all week, and the house so subdued, that she felt quite certain of success. She wondered if her act of vandalism in tearing down the breakfast nook curtains had frightened the house into better behavior, for since that incident there had been no overt act. One of those women, she thought contemptuously, who valued her material possessions above any possible emotional consideration.

And Eric seemed to be content. Rather ponderous, even stodgy, but content. If he was not exactly affectionate, at least he no longer looked at her as though he despised her.

"Eric?" she began.

"Hmmm?"

"Is it all right for me to talk?"

"Talk away."

"All right, but if I distract you, let me know. I was wondering—Labor Day weekend is coming up soon. Have you made any plans for the holiday?"

"Nothing in particular. Though I might try to finish up my 'View of the Pine Woods,' if I can get

your portrait finished by then."

Her heart skipped a beat. Landscapes again? She'd hoped they were through with those pretty, sterile pictures he'd been turning out.

She hid her dismay, and tried to keep her voice casual. "I thought you might enjoy a change of scene."

"Yes? Turn your head just half an inch. That's it."

"Yes. We've seen nothing but this village all summer, and I thought it would be nice to run up to Quebec for the weekend. They say it's still like a glimpse of Old France."

"Sounds possible."

"Well . . . shall we plan on it? I mean, I'll have packing, and so on. Can we?"

She held her breath as he slowly nodded his head.

"Promise?"

"You've gone all tense, Iris! Relax, or I won't get this line just right."

"Promise?" she begged again.

"Promise what?"

"That next weekend we'll go to Quebec for our holiday. No matter what happens, you solemnly promise that we'll go."

"Oh, all right," he said. "I promise." He threw down his brush, then. "And now let's break for a while. I'm tired."

Eric settled himself on the nearest chair.

AFTER that, nothing went quite right.

Eric suggested fish chowder for lunch. Iris searched the pantry shelves twice, and could not find the cans of fish chowder she could have sworn were there. Hoping he would not notice the difference, she got down her good china and served clam chowder instead. Once he wouldn't have cared—he would have grinned and remarked that after all chowder was chowder no matter how you sliced it; but now, he pushed his bowl aside, unfinished. The salad had been bruised too much, he pointed out; and he swore when he bit on a cherry pit in the ice cream.

Even then, Iris did not feel seriously alarmed . . . such things might happen in any household.

Eric shoved his saucer away and stood up. "It's getting late. I don't know how you manage to spend so much time preparing such an unsatisfactory lunch."

Hastily, she began to clear the table.

"And even the breakfast dishes aren't done," he observed. "If I don't want to waste the whole afternoon, I suppose I'll have to help you."

As he rinsed the dishes, she stacked them in the washer—plates, saucers, bowls, cutlery, cups, and glasses. She put in the detergent, closed the lid, and turned the switch.

Pandemonium broke loose. The water rushed in with a roar, the lid vibrated, the dishes rattled, the silverware banged, and crash followed crash.

"Call Mr. Braun!" shouted Eric. "The damned thing's gone crazy!"

Dazedly, she switched off the machine, and they surveyed the wreckage. Only the plastic dishes and the silverware were still intact. Every piece of glass and china was in fragments.

Iris felt cold. The lull was over. The house was attacking again.

She must not let it wreck her plans . . .

"There's nothing to get so excited about," she told Eric laughingly. "You wouldn't want to bother Mr. Braun on a Sunday, when all that happened was that I stacked the dishes carelessly?"

Eric subsided, but Iris was very thoughtful as she cleaned up the pieces.

Back in the studio, the light had changed. Eric fussed over her pose for fully half an hour, and when he did begin to paint, he worked in silence, growing more and more tense.

"Damn!" he said at last.

"What's wrong?"

"Take a break. Come and see for yourself."

He had been working on the yellow brocade, and had somehow smudged the yellow into the pink of the thigh.

"Don't worry," she said, returning to her place. "You can fix that easily."

"It only gets worse," he muttered. "It looks like hell. Well, I'll let it go and work on the face."

GLOWERING, he dabbed on pinheads of color, scraped them off, put on others, jabbed at the canvas with nervous, jerky strokes.

"Why can't you lie still?" he shouted finally. "How can a man paint when you keep fidgeting and shifting the shadows?"

Suddenly he dipped his brush into the Prussian blue, and slashed a giant X of paint across the figure. He slammed the palette to the floor and turned on her:

"No wonder a man takes to landscapes when he has to work with a model like you! You don't know even the rudiments of modeling—you fidget, you move, you jabber like a schoolgirl, and you haven't even got a decent figure to begin with! Look at it!"

Timidly she crept over to look at the canvas.

Staring out at her was a scrawny, raddled nude, one leg a sickly orange, the rest of the body a dirty pink against the gold of the drapery. Lank black hair hung to the face in strings, the mouth sagged at the corners, the chin slumped into the neck, and the eyes were those of a drunken old prostitute.

Iris backed away, shivering. "What have you done to me?" she whispered. Drawing her robe tightly around her to cover her shame, she huddled in the corner.

"Nudes!" Eric cried. "I'll never paint another nude as long as I live! After this, I stick to landscapes!"

Iris heard a woman sigh . . . herself, she wondered? For the first time she realized how terrible a revenge the house could take. A little matter of color values, of shadow and highlight, and it had turned her portrait into that—obscenity.

She felt sick. She had no real hope now of keeping Eric, but she clung fast to the only chance that remained to her.

"You won't let this make any difference, will you?" she whispered.

"Difference to what?"

"Your promise. That we could go away next week-end."

"I don't want a holiday. I want to stay home and paint."

"I know," she pleaded. "But you did promise. You said we'd go."

"You mean you're going to hold me to it?"

She nodded.

The contempt in his eyes was searing, but she would not look away until he answered.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll keep my promise. But I'll never forgive you for making me!"

IN the week that followed, she kept out of his way as much as possible, anxious not to irritate him, terrified of angering the house. She gave up wearing lipstick and rouge; she slicked her hair back behind her ears; she wore her plainest dresses. She cooked Eric's favorite dishes, with great care, and when she walked through the living room she avoided even looking at the radio sitting there, voiceless. She spent hours in the haven of the garden, staring at the demure complacency of the house, fearing it, hugging her hope of defeating it.

She lived only for Saturday, the day they would leave the house for their trip to Quebec. Eric might be angry with her, he might refuse to speak to her, he might even despise her; but still she would rescue him from the wizening, stunting, crippling embrace of the house. Soon, she thought, it will be Saturday, and then—we'll never come back. Once he gets away, he'll change back to himself, and we'll never have to come back.

Quietly, almost furtively, she packed their clothes, and by Friday noon there was nothing left to do. All afternoon she sat in the garden, waiting apprehensively for Eric to come home. Only when he arrived did she have the courage to enter the shadowed living room.

"I'm tired," he said, slumping into his chair. "Dead tired."

She was shocked by the exhaustion in his face. His skin was drawn, his eyes were ringed with black, his voice high and unsteady. She realized guiltily that she had been too much absorbed in her own fears to give any thought to his feelings.

"You're probably hungry," she said. "Are you ready for dinner?"

"Let me rest a while first." Sighing, he dragged himself to his feet. "I'll go up and change clothes, and put on my slippers."

Huddled in her chair, she heard him clump up the stairs to the bedroom, then the noise of his shoes dropping.

"Get me some music, Iris!" he called down. "Something to take this ache out of my bones."

She hated to approach the radio. It took all her nerve and all her determination to put her hand on the switch.

But Eric's here, she thought. It won't hurt me when Eric's here. It doesn't dare.

Still she hesitated, hand raised. She heard him at the head of the stairs, starting down.

"Didn't you hear me?" he shouted. "Music!"

Reluctantly, she forced herself to turn the knob.

A cacaphonous wail, a frenzy of maniacal frequencies shrieked into the air. From the stairway came a cry of terror, a crash, a series of thuds. Iris silenced the

machine and rushed to the door.

Eric lay at the foot of the stairs, his forehead covered with sweat, his face distorted.

"Damn music made me trip," he groaned. "I think I broke my leg."

THE house had beaten her at last.

Eric lay tranquilly in the guest room bed, his leg pegged and braced, his hands idle, his conscience obviously clear. He *would* have kept his promise to go away for the holiday . . . but now, of course, it was impossible. He had broken his leg.

Like an automaton, Iris took care of him. She had no more fight left in her. Her only problem was to decide how soon she dared leave him and go back to her parents. The house gave her no trouble; even the oven behaved itself; but Iris hated every hour she stayed. She had no right there. She was the other woman. Physically, perhaps, Eric was still hers; but emotionally he now belonged to the house. She would leave just as soon as Eric was able to get about on crutches.

One morning he took his first hobbling steps, then collapsed into bed, trembling with the effort. This was the sign she had been waiting for, and after he was asleep she retired to her room and began to pack the pretty clothes she no longer wore, her jewelry, the rose

red robe which she had had cleaned and never worn again.

That night, as she sat by his bed and watched him eat a fluffy yellow and white piece of lemon meringue pie, she told Eric.

He put down his fork, pushed away the tray, and fell back against his pillow.

"You mean you're going to leave me? But *why?*"

"You know why, Eric. This house and I—we don't get along. And you won't move away."

"No," he said slowly, "I can't do that. I like it here. I feel that, in a way, I belong here. But what will I do without you?"

When she did not answer, he turned his face to the wall.

His breakfast tray, next morning, returned to the kitchen scarcely lighter than when it went up. The golden brown rolls at lunch time were ignored, and the lobster soufflé at dinner went back to the kitchen, a flabby, dispirited-looking mound.

Iris exerted herself to prepare the most delectable dishes she could think of, and the stove co-operated perfectly, but he was never hungry. He lost weight visibly from one day to the next; his skin grew pale and translucent. Lying on the bed, or crutching feebly to the window, he looked like a man who had been ill for months.

I can't help it, Iris reminded

herself as she locked her trunk the afternoon of the day she planned to leave. *He's not my responsibility any longer. I'm too tired to struggle any more. The house has got him, and it's up to the house to make him eat, or let him die. Anybody cruel enough to break a man's leg in order to keep him probably wouldn't hesitate to starve him to death rather than give him up. But it's not my problem any longer.*

SHE was locking her jewel case when the front doorbell rang.

She went down to admit Mr. Braun, the repairman, who waited with his bag under his arm.

"Heard about your husband's accident, Mrs. Beauchamp. That's why I haven't been around sooner."

"What do you mean?" said Iris.

"Didn't think you'd want me underfoot the first few days after he'd just broke his leg, so I thought I'd wait a while longer for that repair job."

"I still don't understand, Mr. Braun . . . I didn't call you."

"I know you didn't, ma'am, but your husband reported a couple of weeks ago that the dishwasher was acting up. Something about the way he described it made me think I'd better check up on things again. Sometimes the equipment in these old houses does act temperamental. If you don't mind, I'll

just have a look at the circuit box."

She followed him into the cellar, where he opened the box and inspected the array of controls, then jiggled a tester in his hand, speculatively.

"How's the TV set behaving these days?"

"I never play it any more."

"I heard it was going the night he broke his leg?"

"Yes . . . It was. He asked me to turn it on."

"Everything normal?"

"Now, look here, Mr. Braun," she said wearily. "What do you expect me to say? You know you don't consider me a reliable witness. Anyway, it's not my affair any more. I'm going home."

He peered into the box, shaking his head. "Can't take it? Well, some people can't. You never know. Well, now, this is funny!"

"What's funny?"

"This refrigerator control. Bet a nickel you've been having trouble with it, and yet you've never said a word about it."

"No. I never could remember. It defrosts itself every now and then, usually just when we want some ice."

"Shouldn't be surprised," he said, clicking his tongue. "The way these controls are set isn't at all what I like to see. Too much latitude. I'd better fix it."

"It doesn't matter now . . . my husband doesn't drink any more,

and as I told you, I'm going away."

"Fix it anyway," he said, inserting a screwdriver. "I like to see things in tiptop shape. There. It ought to behave itself now."

HE closed the box and followed her up the stairs. "And now for that dishwasher. Been throwing her weight around, I shouldn't wonder. But I'll settle her, all right. How's your husband's painting going these days?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"That takes care of the dishwasher," he said. "I'll just look in the refrigerator. Plenty of ice now, I see. Useful on a hot day like this one, when you're hot and tired."

Iris smiled. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Braun? Say, a dry Martini?"

Beaming, he sank down on a kitchen chair, while Iris broke out the ice cubes and mixed the drink. She was amused at his delusion that a few turns of a screwdriver could daunt this house; it could behave angelically when it wanted to. Also, it was evidently indifferent to the dissipation of strangers, since it hadn't bothered to defrost for Mr. Braun's drink.

"Have one with me?" he urged.

The ice was still unmelted, she saw with surprise; she made herself a drink and sat down facing Mr. Braun, who leaned back and

put his fingertips together.

"Now look here, Mrs. Beauchamp. I'm only a repairman—an adjuster, you might say; but still, I think about things. I told you the last time I was here you'd have to learn to get along, or else move to the hotel. You have to learn to adjust. Have you honestly tried your best, before running off home? Don't you realize everybody has to adjust to something? Maybe this house was harder to deal with than I realized at first—if you'd only mentioned that defrosting business, I'd have been into the control box sooner. Not much I can do, of course. But why not think things over a little longer?" He put down his glass and stood up. "Remember, ma'am—in this world you got to give, and take."

WHEN he had gone, she sat on alone, wondering what life would be without Eric. But could she honestly regret losing a man who had altered as much as he had? What she longed for, she knew, was the old Eric, the one she had known before the house took him.

Restless, she got up and walked into the living room, pacing the floor. Impulsively, she turned on the radio as she passed it, wondering what the cacophony would sound like this time.

Immediately there issued from the cabinet a gentle, placating

strain of symphonic music.

More tricks, she thought, and turned it off.

But the sound haunted her, and she switched it on again, to hear the exalted melancholy of the Berg Violin Concerto. The clarinet spoke pleadingly, the violin supplanted in sad arpeggios, the whole complex harmony cried: Reconciliation!

She heard it with complete skepticism. *Too late now, my friend*, she thought. *The struggle's over, and you've won. What have you got to be resigned to? You can quit your tricks now.*

Defiantly she went to the kitchen and mixed another Martini. Back in the living room, she stirred the ice, sipped the drink, and thought of Mr. Braun. Peculiar little man. Nice to be able to have a cocktail now and then. Adjust, the man had said.

Adjust . . . What was he trying to tell her?

What was the violin saying?

Adjust?

Suddenly she put down her glass and ran upstairs to her bedroom. Unlocking her trunk, she tossed clothes to the floor, hunting. She put on her most frivolous afternoon frock, the cherry-colored one with the frills at the low neck. She looked in the mirror. Why, she looked pretty! Prettier than she had been all summer!!

So far so good, she thought.

Taking out her lip rouge, she rubbed some into her lips—but the image in the mirror grimaced at her with such a dark, misshapen mouth that she hastily wiped away the color.

All right, she thought. I am allowed to wear pretty clothes, but no makeup. Right?

She ran down to the living room, where the radio still pleaded. At the window, she lifted her hands to the white curtains and began to take them down. Horns and violas grated in harsh dissonance. She lowered her hands, and the music resolved itself into a chord.

Laughing, she backed away from the curtains. *All right, all right! Furniture not to be meddled with. And now let's see if you really mean it!*



IN the studio, the lifeless landscapes stood about in stacks. She turned one to the wall, tentatively. Nothing happened. She turned another. Nothing happened. But when she turned the "View of the Pine Woods," a cloud cut off the sun from the skylight. Quickly, she turned them all back to a visible position.

Taking a deep breath, she approached her own portrait. A faded splash of blue still criss-crossed the body, but the skin tones were no longer the sickly color of decay, and the face of the portrait was her own.

She nodded her head. *I see, she thought. I let you play in my yard, you let me play in yours. He can do landscapes to please your tastes; but he can paint nudes too.*

And now—

She tiptoed into Eric's room. His wasted face was pale, but he grinned feebly when she waked him.

"Hi there, my pigeon!"

Her heart nearly stopped beating. This was the first time he had spoken her pet name since—since the day the house found him!

She watched him carefully. "Eric, would you—would you like a cigarette before I go?"

"No, Iris," he said gently. "Have you forgotten? I've given up smoking."

"Oh. So we don't smoke. Hard on the curtains, I suppose. Well,

would you like a drink? A nice, cool Martini?"

"A drink? Well . . . I don't know . . . beck, why not! After all, one little drink'll never do us any harm."

So the house wants to arbitrate! she thought jubilantly. It's afraid! She's afraid he'll die and she'll lose him!

"Try to rest, Eric. I'll bring your drink."

"But won't you be late? Won't you miss your train?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Perhaps I won't be going."

She stopped in her bedroom for a moment, and as an experiment took off her dress and stood before the mirror in only her slip. Dropping that to the floor, she stood there, nude. At once she began to shiver in the cold breeze from the window. Darting to the open trunk, she took out the rose red robe and wrapped it around her bare body. Yes, that was delightfully warm.

All right, she thought. I'm to keep myself covered, but I may wear the most seductive frivols I can find.

DOWNSTAIRS again, she mixed the drinks, and set them on the living room table while she approached the radio.

Let's get this clear, she thought. You won't give up Eric; but you realize that if you want to keep

him alive, you'll have to let him keep me, too. That means we'll have to adjust. I'll compromise if you will. I won't use makeup, at least in your house. I won't go around without any clothes on, and I'll leave the furniture as it is. But you'll have to stop tormenting me! And if you want me to stay, you'll have to quit trying to reform Eric. Let him alone! Let him be himself, paint what he likes, drink what he likes, and be fond of me when he likes. You'll have him living with you, but let him be himself! Understand?

The violin soared elegiacally.

Lifting the tray of drinks, Iris thought briefly of Mr. Braun, the repairman, who had always wanted to paint. What kind of a house had him, she wondered, that he never managed to find the time?

As she started up the stairs, she

giggled. She had just realized the meaning of the bargain they had made. The Mrs. Beauchamp of a month ago, the respectable, conventional housewife, would have refused indignantly. And the other housewife, the prudish, strait-laced personality which prided itself on the austerity of its moral principles, would have died of shame if it had been suggested to her during her widowhood. Who could have imagined that either woman would ever have agreed to a *ménage à trois*?

But women are realists, Iris thought, opening the door to Eric's room.

So each of Eric's wives had agreed to accept the other.

Boyd Ellarby

Of all the precious gems, the opal is perhaps the most widely believed to be an unlucky stone. Silly superstition, of course. A controlled experiment would quickly show that wearers of opals experience no more misfortune than non-wearers.

Or would it?

King Alfonso XII of Spain was not testing the superstition when he gave his bride an opal ring. She died soon after. While she was still lying in state, he offered the ring to his sister. She was dead the same week of the Queen's funeral. His sister-in-law was the next recipient. She lasted longer—three months.

It was then that Alfonso experimented, this time by wearing the ring himself. Within a few weeks, he was on his deathbed.

The Queen Regent, less hard to convince, took no chances with the ring of doom. She had it strung as a necklace for the statue of the Virgin of Almudena of Madrid. No thief has been desperate enough to steal it.

Just Imagine

By TED REYNOLDS

*He liked them for what they
were—why did they have to like
him only for what he wasn't?*

THE Figment liked the young of Earth. He enjoyed romping with them on the grass or crawling under the covers with them at night. At this moment the baby was very persistently trying to detach his rubbery antennae, while the older child, whom they called Joan, tickled his webbed feet. Far from resenting this, the Figment liked it. Everybody here

was fun. He liked this world.

On the porch of the wide house that fronted the lawn, two men were thinking. The Figment listened to their thoughts with part of his mind. As yet no one had found out that he was telepathic—a receiving but not a sending station.

One man's thoughts were familiar. Kane's. He was thinking of the

Illustrated by VIDMER



Figment. His mind was worried:

Six weeks—only six weeks ago Joan came rushing into the house, slamming the door behind her, breaking into the study, calling, "Papa! Papa! There's a flobbity downstairs!"

A flobbity—the gremlinish creatures in the Land of Slan, one of Joan's books. It was rather surprising to find that there really was something in the yard. Not a flobbity, of course. It was the Figment.

THE other man interrupted with speech. The Figment knew that this human was a scientist, Dr. Brandt.

"I wish you'd change your mind, Kane," Dr. Brandt said. "We can get a court order, you know. It'd be easier just to hand him over."

"I won't let him be harmed. He's part of the family by now!"

"I'll tell you again just what the machine will do," Dr. Brandt sounded impatient. "It will record



thought-waves as electro-magnetic patterns. If we ask the machine to find out where he was born, it will stimulate those brain cells which carry that information and record it and throw the result on the screen. It won't and can't hurt him a bit. The machine is infallible."

"I still say no," Kane sounded firm. But his thoughts told the Figment that he was weakening.

"I'm thinking of you too, you know," Dr. Brandt went on. "How do you know what he really thinks? He's not from Earth. Nothing like that ever evolved here. He might harm your children—"

"He wouldn't," Kane objected. "He's friendly—"

"And think of what you owe science," Dr. Brandt continued remorselessly. "Think of the things he can tell us! The complete knowledge of an alien being—all he has known and seen! Strange worlds, creatures, new viewpoints,

... and how did he get here?"

The argument continued. The Figment eavesdropped, feeling the old, old fear. If the Earthmen tried to read his mind . . .

He had been on many worlds and met many intelligent beings. Most of them had been friendly. Sooner or later, however, they had all tried to learn his thoughts. Those races who were telepathic read his mind quickly. Those who used machines took longer. But they all tried, and when they learned his thoughts, they wouldn't play. They simply wouldn't pay any attention to him at all. He liked these Earth people too well to lose them . . .

He knew that Kane wouldn't want to let him go. Eventually, however, he would give way to Dr. Brandt and the other scientists. He couldn't let his children play with a potentially dangerous creature.

Therefore the Figment was not

surprised when, a few days later, Kane lifted him by his forelegs and carried him carefully to the car. He could have struggled, but not without the possibility of injuring Kane.

Here it was again. They were going to read his mind. His already frantic thoughts speeded. No solution was in sight. No solution had ever come along at such times, though each time it was different — different motivations, different techniques, instruments. But always he hoped . . . oh, they *mustn't* learn his secret.

HE crouched in a corner of the large room where Kane had set him down. The room was filled with wires and shining apparatus and a huge machine that glowed redly in the center. The Figment shivered, foretasting loneliness. If he could only tear out some of those wires, it might delay his betrayal. Eying some of the nearer ones, he made ready to leap—

Hands closed over him. Kane lifted him and carried him to a small metal box, connected by a cable to the machine. He struggled, but other hands held him tightly. He was placed inside and straps were fastened about him.

He must boid his secret back!

The electrodes were fastened to his head: "First feed the machine this one, 'Who are you?' Then put in, 'When were you born?' and

"Where did you come from?" Then try the others."

"Watch the screen! Give it the first question!"

W-h-o a-r-e y-o-u?

THEY MUSTN'T LEARN MY SECRET! THEY MUSTN'T LEARN MY SECRET! *THEY MUSTN'T—!*

Click!

"But why—why?" asked Kane, stupefied. "What happened to him?"

"He was nothing but a will to exist," replied Dr. Brandt. "He wanted to exist so greatly that he hypnotized us into believing that he did."

"But he was—"

"No, he wasn't. He wasn't real. He just made us think he was. He fooled me, too—but as soon as the machine told us that he wasn't real, then we knew the truth and so he couldn't even appear to be. He was just a figment of his own imagination. It's too bad. I liked him."

"You liked him! What about me? And what do I tell the kids?"

The Figment pawed at Kane's leg, but the human paid no attention. He wouldn't play any more. The Figment would have to go on.

All he wanted was a friend.

Just a friend.

Ted Reynolds

By FRANKLIN GREGORY

The Big Breeze



There's no wind so ill that Torkel

Jarl can't make it blow good!

DAD always warned me to watch out for three kinds of scamps — Democrats, Republicans and lightning rod salesmen. There are plenty of the first two kinds here in New York City, but since I'm not overly interested in politics they've never bothered me much. As for the lightning rod business, it doesn't



Illustrated by SALE

seem to amount to a hill of beans in the neighborhood where I work, which is Wall Street.

Of course, Dad has lightning rods on his house and barn back in Spink County; but he always said it was just for appearance's sake. He figured it wasn't seemly for all the neighbors to have them and him not to. He claimed he never put any faith in them, though, and he put lightning rod salesmen in the same barrel of bad apples with medicine shows and fortune tellers and those diviner fellows who think they can find water with a forked hazel twig.

"Just plain witchcraft!" Dad would snort. "If the Good Lord wanted to strike my house, I guess He'd find a way all right—lightning rod or no lightning rod!"

Dad would tell about the lightning rod salesman who used to drive a buggy from farm to farm in Spink County. He was a German named Heimer from the old country, and once he'd got a farmer fair hooked, and the lightning rods were installed, he'd casually say:

"Now for der double prodection, mizder, you should under der roof keep der St. John's ashes."

"St. John's ashes?" the surprised farmer would ask. "What in tarnation's that?"

And the old German would explain that it was ashes from the midsummer bonfires of St. John's

Eve in Bavaria; and it just so happened he had a small supply, if the farmer cared to spend a "liddle exdra."

The idea was, Dad said, that lightning is a manifestation of the Devil, and there was nothing like the sacred ashes from a St. John's bonfire to keep the devil away.

There was an old Flemish farmer next to us in Spink County named Hendrik van Sleeckx whom I remembered well because his daughter, Gretchen, was the meanest and homeliest brat in our school. Dad always laughed when he told how van Sleeckx and the lightning rod salesman got in an argument one time. Van Sleeckx claimed that St. John's ashes weren't any good at all; that what you really needed was a piece of charred Kersmismot, or yule log—but only if gin had been thrown on the Kersmismot while it was burning.

"Hendrik never did buy a lightning rod," Dad would laugh. "But he always kept the Kersmismot in the attic—and I think that's where he kept his gin, too, so his missus couldn't find it."

WELL, I guess you get the idea that Dad was a shrewd man; and if he ever came to New York, nobody would ever sell him Brooklyn Bridge.

But when it came to windmills . . .

IT was August that year when I made my annual visit home, and I'd been reading quite a bit about the bad drought that had hit the Dakotas. I remembered such years as a kid. The summers are hot and dry and the crops burn up, and there's no feed for the cattle and you have to ship out your herds before they're ready for market. But one of the worst things about it is that the long, hot spells are usually pretty windless. Without much breeze, the windmills don't work, and it's all a farm family can do to hand-pump enough water for their own needs, let alone fill the horse trough or water the truck garden.

Well, this year was like that. I could see it from the coach window as the Northwestern accommodation poked along toward our town of Samaritan. The country looked pretty well fagged out. And yet, somehow, there was something different than in past drought years.

I was sitting there puzzling about it when the girl in the seat behind me leaned forward and said, "Pardon me, but have you ever seen anything like that?"

She had a nice voice, which was a surprise to me, for when she'd got on at Sioux Falls I'd taken one fast gander at her heavy shell-rimmed specs and set her down as one of those business career types. Because I've always fol-

lowed Dorothy Parker's advice about gals who wear glasses, I hadn't given her a second look.

So I just half-turned my head and said, "Anything like what?"

"Do you see that windmill up on the hill?" she asked.

I glanced out the window and said, "Yes'm."

And she said, "Spinning awfully fast, isn't it?"

And I said, "Yes'm. Going like blazes."

And she said, "Now do you see those trees right behind it?"

And I said, "Yes'm. What about 'em?"

"What about 'em?" she mimicked. "My dear sir, would you by any chance need glasses? Can't you see that not a leaf is stirring, and yet that windmill--"

That was pretty tart talk from a girl I didn't know from Eve, and I started getting warm under the collar. But all the same I looked again, and by George if she wasn't right! And it was what had been bothering me all along about the countryside, only I was too dumb to figure it out for myself.

IT was eerie, and I felt a funny tingling along the nape of my neck. And it wasn't just at the one farm. Every farm that we passed, it was the same thing--the windmill's big sails whizzing around, and not even a zephyr stirring a

blade of grass or a tree leaf.

Then I noticed another thing. Not all the windmills were facing the same direction. If there'd been a wind, which there wasn't any sign of, all the windwheels would be heading the same way because their weather vanes would see to that.

Suddenly the girl leaned forward again and said, with a softer tone as if she were sorry for being so peppery and wanted to make up by asking my advice, "But there has to be a rational explanation, doesn't there? Do you think they have gas engines running them?"

"Lady," I said over my shoulder, and I was still sore, "I can see you don't know beans about windmills. Or farmers, either."

"Why, you—" she gasped.

I turned around. Her face was averted, but from the way she was rapping her fingers on the sooty windowsill and the way her lower lip trembled, I could see she was madder than a wet hen.

"You city-bred, lily-livered, Broadway gigolo!" she exploded. "What I don't know about farming isn't worth knowing!"

"Or else," I went on, ignoring her outburst, "you'd know those windmills have a pull-out like an auto has gear shifts. And there's not a farmer in his right mind would hook onto power without first disengaging the windwheel. Where's the call for a farmer wast-

ing a lot of fuel running the whole assembly when all he wants to work is the pump itself?"

My neck was twisted around toward her, and the girl was still looking away when the conductor came along and said, "This man getting fresh with you, lady?"

When she didn't say anything, the conductor glared at me and said, "If he is, lady, you just say so and we'll throw him off."

I turned around and stared straight ahead. I could feel my face getting red, and I felt like crawling down below the collar of my jacket like a turtle. I tell you, there's nothing like a woman to get a man in trouble; it doesn't matter even if you're going along minding your own business, just as I was before she busted in talking to me. Something goes wrong, and they'll twist it around somehow to put the blame on you.

ANYHOW, we got to Samaritan finally, and it seemed she was getting off there too. I could see she was having trouble with her bags and, sore as I was, I had half a mind to help her anyway—but I figured she'd just turn up her nose and maybe find an excuse to make more trouble. So I strolled down the aisle and got off the train. And she came staggering after me, and it was when she was stepping down to the platform that I got my first real good look at her.

Brother, was she a stunner!

Trim legs with just a flirt of frilly lace and white skin showing above one knee for a moment; a neat, slim torso wrapped in a bright blue tropical suit; buckwheat honey blonde hair topped by a pert blue hat that would set you back fifty bucks any day at Mr. John's; and now she'd taken off her cheaters so you could attend to details—lively blue eyes, a cute nose turned up a little too far, luscious red lips and . . . well, I already knew what that small, firm chin stood for.

I thought she reminded me of somebody, some movie star maybe. Then I heard Dad calling from across the platform, and I glanced over and there he was coming toward me, and with him was old Hendrik van Sleeckx, the Flemish farmer who kept the Kersmismot (and his gin) in the attic.

Then it dawned on me, and I turned back to the girl.

"Why, Gretchen van Sleeckx!" I called, and grinned like a fool and tried to reach out for one of her bags. I was remembering the homely little brat I'd grown up with, and thinking of what a knock-out she'd grown into.

She looked at me oddly for a moment, and then with cool recognition. Up went that cute nose, and with it, of course, up went that small, firm chin. And Gretch said real cold:

"So—Charles James Jones! Well! That's the kind of man you turned into—picking up strange girls on trains! And then not even helping them with their bags!"

I nearly choked. "Look here, it was you who spoke first, and—"

But she'd already huffily turned her back. I tell you, there's no accounting for the contrariness of a female!

I TOLD Mom about it later, after I got home and unpacked.

Mom was shelling peas on the back porch, and she glanced up and eyed me speculatively over her specs.

"Well, son, I guess no girl likes to be reminded of her own indiscretions . . . You haven't seen Gretchen in quite a spell, have you?"

"Must be six-seven years," I said. "Her temper hasn't changed any, but lordy, she's become pretty."

"H'm," said Mom. Mom's "h'ms" are never without meaning, and I wondered what she meant by this one.

"Of course," Mom went on, "Gretchen usually never comes home except at Christmas, so you'd have no chance to see the gradual change. She's a big success in the city now."

"Sioux Falls?" I said—partly because that's where Gretchen got on the train, and partly because when

I was a kid that was the most city any of us knew.

"Land, no!" Mom exclaimed. "New York, right where you are, son. She's a cartoonist."

"Huh!" I said. "Why, she couldn't draw a straight line in school."

She went to Art Institute in Chicago," Mom said. She got up, brushed off her apron, took the pan of peas into the kitchen and came out a moment later with a stack of Sunday comic supplements. I never read the silly things myself, but I knew there were darn few women in the business.

Gretchen's cartoon strip seemed to be of the Buck Rogers type, with interplanetary rockets and such, but the main character was a pioneer woman on Saturn and the emphasis seemed to be on how women of the future will keep house out there in space.

I tossed them aside. "Such junk!"

"Better not let Gretchen hear that," Mom warned.

WELL, what with gabbling with Mom and eating her swell home-cooking and getting brought up to date on all the local sin and scandal, it wasn't till after supper when I was helping Dad with the barnyard chores that I discovered that our windmill was just like all the others I'd seen that afternoon. Old Faithless, we

used to call her; but she was anything but that now. Not a breath of air was stirring, but the old gal was all revved up and going to town with the groans and clinks that are alike to windmills the world over when they're working fast and proper.

Just to make sure, I walked over to the base of the windmill tower to see if there was an engine of some kind hooked up. There wasn't, of course; and I just stood there, gaping up at the windwheel bug-eyed.

Dad saw me. "Not like the last drought, eh, Charlie?"

"It sure gives me the creeps," I said. "What is it, black magic?"

Dad grinned. "Man came around last spring."

"I didn't say anything, and Dad pulled his pocket knife out of one overall pocket and a piece of wood from another and squatted down on his haunches and began to whittle. And I knew from that he was getting serious about something. Finally, he said:

"You know, Charlie, I always wanted you to stay here on the farm and sort of take over from me when the time came for me to slow down. But you know, lately, I'm sort of glad you'did what you did."

I waited, sort of embarrassed. Confidences are never easy between men; and Dad and I had never spoken much about it once

I'd decided on a career in finance. Now he glanced up at me with one eye half closed and said:

"Ma says you're doing pretty well."

"Well," I said, "I didn't mean to say anything about it till it actually happened, but when I go back they're making me a junior partner."

Dad nodded his head a couple of times and kept on whittling. "Be home for a month as usual?"

And when I nodded, he said, "Yes, that ought to do it. Yes, I think you're just the man we need."

"Dad," I said, "what are you driving at?"

He took another cut or two at the wood, and then said slowly, "Well, there's some of us in the Farm Co-op think we've got ahold of something pretty good. Something that'll make money. Not just *some* money, but a whole lot of money. In fact," and Dad closed his knife, and stood up, "it's so much money it's sort of got us scared. Ordinarily, we'd go to old Tom Blakelee at the Samaritan Bank to do for us. But here we'd be issuing stocks and maybe floating bonds and all sorts of intricate things old Tom nor any of us know much about, and then there's a patent problem, too, and some engineering. And somebody like you from Wall Street would just fit the bill."

"Why, sure, sure, Dad," I said, curious and surprised, too. "But what's it all about?"

"I kind of think," Dad said, ignoring my question, "it's why Gretchen van Sleeckx came home out-of-season, so to say. You might have to work with her." And he gave me the same sort of speculative look that Mom did when talking about her.

"Yes, but—" I started to say.

"Let's climb the windmill," Dad said.

WE climbed the narrow steel ladder up the tower, me first and Dad after, because he said he wanted me to get a close look.

It was getting on toward sunset, and when I reached the little platform just under the spinning windsails, I could see for miles across the flat yellow prairie with its checkerboard of fields, its green windbreaks, and the occasional cluster of red and white farm buildings, each with its windmill whizzing away. And along the western horizon—away out beyond the curving line of trees that marked the course of the James River—there was a broad band of clouds with the sun dropping behind them, making them purple and gold and red. I always did say there's nothing like a Dakota sunset.

Close by was the van Sleeckx layout, and I wondered if the

woman I saw walking out toward the barn was Gretchen. I felt I could jump right out and land beside her. You get a sort of lord-and-master feeling on top of a windmill that you don't get anywhere else. And I remembered how I used to climb Old Faithless when I was a kid and pretend I was Don Quixote fighting the windmills.

From farther down on the ladder, Dad broke the spell: "Now you see that little metal gadget screwed to the weather vane right behind the sails?" he asked. And when I said I did, Dad said: "Now put your hand up in front of it—not too far in, just easy like."

Cautiously I stuck my hand up—and golly, did I jerk it back fast! Never in my life had I felt a blast of air so strong! And it was blowing in a steady jet stream right into the sails.

I took a good look at the "gadget" then. It wasn't any bigger than a pack of cigarettes, and it looked like one of those miniature model airplane engines that run on a thimbleful of gas, only it had a tiny jet sticking out of the cylinder, and that was where the wind was blowing from. I could hardly believe that such a little power plant could pack such a wallop.

"You'll notice," Dad said, "we had to reverse the pitch of the windmill blades, because you got

the wind coming from behind now instead of from in front."

"What's this?" I asked Dad, pointing to a short length of fish line that had two knots tied in it and was hanging down from the little engine.

"Man says it's the starter," Dad said. "Seems you wind her up like you do an outboard motor. You aren't supposed to monkey with it."

"What's she use for fuel?" I asked.

"Man says it's got a little solid fuel cartridge like they use for self-starters in jet engines."

"How often you have to replace it?"

"Man says she'll last a lifetime."

"Huh?" I glanced down at Dad.

"Well," Dad said, sheepish-like and yet defensive at the same time, "I know what you're thinking—that there isn't any such thing as perpetual motion. But, Charlie, she's been working right along ever since I had her put in last spring. And so've the rest of 'em hereabouts."

I never had such an itch to take something apart as I did just then with that miniature motor, but Dad told me to keep my dukes off. Neither of us said anything climbing back down the ladder. My mind was going a mile a minute—I was sure there had to be a catch somewhere in the deal.

Finally, when we'd settled ourselves on the front porch, I said,

"How much it cost?" I was wondering if he'd sunk a lot of dough in it.

Then Dad really floored me.

"Five bucks," he said complacently.

DAD sat up a lot later than his usual 10 o'clock bedtime that night, telling all about it. It seemed that early in the year an old Finnish fellow called Torkel Jarl came through the countryside peddling the gadgets. He had trouble selling the first few, but after they were installed and running, they sold themselves. Listening to the steady creaking of Old Faithless there in the dark, I didn't wonder.

"You mean," I exclaimed, "this fellow just goes around the country peddling these things for five bucks? Doesn't he know he's got a gold mine? Why, that thing's got enough push to run a B-36!"

Dad sucked at his pipe and the red glow of the tobacco lit up the grin on his face.

"That's what I'm coming to," he said. "He's just a dumb Finn and don't realize the possibilities. That's what Hans Heimer says."

"Who?"

"Hans Heimer. He's the son of that lightning rod salesman I used to tell you about."

"Oh," I said, and smelled a rat. "Didn't he used to promote oil royalties?"

"That's right," Dad said. "He's

treasurer of our corporation."

"Your what?"

"The Big Breeze Corporation,"

Dad said. "Some of us in the Co-op got together and formed it. I put in five and van Sleetx put in five and—"

"Five dollars?" I asked.

"Five thousand dollars," Dad said.

I whistled. "What for?"

"Why," Dad said, "the idea's to try to buy out the Finn—or at least finance expansion of the thing and promote it. You see, you build one the size of a Ford engine and you could damn near run a battleship with it."

IF it hadn't been that I could still hear Old Faithless groaning and creaking along up there, and if it hadn't been I'd darn near had my hand knocked off by the gadget's blast, I'd have thought Dad was off his rocker.

"What's Torkel Jarl think about all this?" I asked.

"Well," Dad said slowly, "that's the hitch. We've only been able to raise forty-fifty thousand, seeing how it's a pretty poor year—and now Heimer says the Finn's holding out for a lot more."

"Wait a minute," I said, "now, wait a minute. I thought you said he didn't realize the importance of the thing?"

"That was at first," Dad said. "But when Heimer approached

him and the Finn smelled the money . . ."

"I see," I said. "Who's got the money?"

"It's in the corporation's account in the Samaritan Bank," Dad said.

"Heimer can draw on it?"

"That's right. Whenever the Finn sees reason. But I don't guess he's going to—and it's such a good thing, the only way some of us can see is to float a stock issue to get enough money for the Finn. And I thought maybe you could use—your influence—"

I could just see the sound, conservative firm of Todd, Todhunter & Topp offering a stock in a company named the Big Breeze. But I didn't say anything. Instead, I asked:

"Does Torkel Jarl make them himself?"

"He tells Heimer he does."

"Does he have a patent?"

"Heimer says he doesn't."

"In fact," I said, "all you know about this thing is what Hans Heimer, son of a lightning rod salesman, tells you. Right?"

"Well, now," Dad said, "after all, Hans grew up in this county and—"

"And sold all his friends a lot of royalties on oil leases on unproved land," I finished.

Dad got up and walked down the porch steps and into the yard, and he stood there gazing up at

Old Faithless stark against the night sky.

"Sounds right pretty, don't she?" he said.

WELL, there was something there, all right; and there was something that wasn't there. That's the way I looked at it. And I was still puzzling over it when I finally fell asleep that night.

The next day was Sunday and Dad said there would be a meeting of the directors of the Big Breeze at van Sleeckx's house that afternoon and he wanted me to go along. I jumped at the chance, figuring I'd be seeing Gretchen. But after breakfast, "who should drive up to our house but Gretchen herself.

She had on a sleeveless red and white cotton dress with a low, cool neck, and she looked so pretty I gawked a little.

"Hi!" she called from behind the wheel, just as if nothing had happened the day before. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Hi, yourself!" I said, coming up to the car. "You certainly are wonderful."

"Silly! I mean about how Dad and your Dad are going to make so much money out of those wind-mill things!"

"Oh," I said, with less enthusiasm.

"I'm in it, too," she said brightly. "Hans Heimer — he's the

handsomest man with the cutest mustache—was over to our house last night and explained all about it. I'm in for two thousand. Are you investing?"

"Not that I've heard of," I grunted.

"Ob-but-you-must," she said, running her words together. "There's such-a-future-in-reaction-engines!"

"In what?" I asked.

"Reaction engines, silly. They're the coming thing, you know. Hans says that with a Torkel Jarl engine the size of Dad's tractor, you could run the *Queen Mary*. It'll run cars and boats and airplanes and machines and maybe even spaceships! No fuel and no upkeep. Hans says—"

Well, I could see that this Kraut had made quite an impression on Gretchen, but I didn't say anything about my suspicions for fear she might think I was jealous.

Then she said, "And Hans thinks it's just wonderful that your firm is going to finance it!"

"We're what?" I said, and I could see that the party lines had been busy ever since I gotten back home. "Todd, Todhunter & Topp," I said as gravely as I could, "are very conservative, Gretchen. I'm not sure they would finance a company that planned to manufacture wind engines."

"Ob-but-you'd-see-they-would," she said brightly. And flashing a

smile that knocked me goofy, she drove off.

THE directors' meeting was held in the van Sleeck's front parlor, and though Dad was chairman of the board, it was Hans Heimer who did all the talking. He was a smoothie, all right, with con man written all over him; but I guess because he'd grown up in the county and folks were used to him, they didn't see it. Gretchen, in fact, sat on the edge of a borsehair chair soaking him up like a sponge.

He ran on at the mouth about how he'd just been talking with Torkel Jarl for the umpteenth time, and how the Finn wouldn't sell out for less than a million, and how the only thing to do was to raise the money on the outside.

"He still selling his gadgets for five dollars?" I asked.

Heimer didn't seem to know, but one of the directors said, "Why, yes, he is. I heard just last week he'd been up in Brown County selling them."

"Wouldn't you think he'd raise his price?" I asked, and Gretchen gave me a funny look. Then I added: "Now, as I understand it, Mr. Heimer is the only one here who has talked with Torkel Jarl? Right?"

"If you are implying—" Heimer began, and Gretchen's look at me this time was downright dirty.

"I'm not implying anything," I

said. "But if there's one thing you learn in Wall Street, it's to look before you leap. And I for one don't intend to get into this thing before I talk to Mr. Jarl myself."

"Charles James Jones!" Gretchen cried. "You're positively insulting to Mr. Heimer!"

The others didn't say anything, but I could see that Heimer was getting red in the face and that Dad was chewing his pipe stem nervously.

I leaned over to him and whispered, "Lightning rod salesman. Scamps. Witchcraft. Remember?"

Dad grinned faintly, and I knew I had him with me. So I said, sort of apologetically though I really didn't feel that way, "Now be reasonable, Heimer. To get the SEC to okay a stock issue, you have to draw up a prospectus. And that prospectus has to give engineering details and it has to show you own the patent and so on. That's why I've got to see this inventor."

Van Sloecks and the other directors and Dad saw that this made sense and they all nodded their heads. All but Gretchen.

"So if you'll just make arrangements for me to see him," I said, "say, tomorrow morning about nine o'clock?"

Heimer saw he was cornered then, so he changed his tune and said, "Well, if you'd explained all that before . . . why, sure, you meet me at the Samaritan House,

and . . . uh—" He paused and seemed to reflect: "But let's make it nine-thirty, okay?"

And the meeting busted up, with Gretchen not even looking my way as I went out the door.

THE more I thought of it, the more I didn't like Hans Heimer's sudden change of manner. It was a dead cinch he'd resented my butting into the business, but then all of a sudden he got cooperative. Also, I wondered what difference a half hour would make to him. Having already sized up the guy, I figured he was up to no good. But I couldn't figure out what it was, unless he wanted to get to Torkel Jarl first for some reason.

"Why don't you see Jarl first?" Mom said, when I talked to her about it that evening.

"Yeah?" I grunted. "If anybody knew where he lived, which folks don't seem to."

"Humph!" said Mom. "I can see you've been living in the city so long you've forgotten what a party line's for."

And Mom got on the telephone—that old-fashioned kind you crank up—and it wasn't fifteen minutes before she came around and crowed, "He's staying at Mrs. Hathaway's rooming house in town, and he's there now—if you want him."

I don't think Dad's old station wagon ever made the trip to Sa-

maritan faster than it did that night. It wasn't thirty minutes before I was knocking at Mrs. Hathaway's door on Elm Street and she was answering the door herself.

"Humph!" she said, just like Mom, when I told her what I came for. "That crazy old coot! Land sake, I can't see what anybody'd want to see him about, what with all his mumbling like a lunatic and the books of gibberish he's got up there. I swan, I'd as lief let him bed somewheres else except he always pays his rent on time and never has no callers nor makes any other kind of fuss."

"Why," I said, surprised, "I understand Hans Heimer calls around quite often?"

"That no-good Heimer?" Mrs. Hathaway said, compressing her lips. "I wouldn't let him past my door."

I DON'T know what I expected, but I certainly didn't expect what I saw.

There were electric lights in the room, but they weren't lit. Instead, three or four candles were burning, and they illuminated a shriveled, white-thatched gnome of a man sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed like a tailor. He was tying knots into short lengths of fishing line, and then tying each length to a gadget exactly like the one I'd seen on Dad's wind-

mill. And all the time he was muttering to himself. Finally, he glanced up with the brightest blue eyes I ever saw.

I explained what I'd come for. I wasn't sure he would understand. But suddenly he giggled.

"Sbrace shibs? Airplanes? Shibs at sea? Sure, sure, dem I could make go by my big winds. But how would we stob dem? I could nod be on dem all, could I?"

"But," I reasoned, "why would you have to? If you can make something like this start—" and I picked up one of the tiny engines—"an inventor like yourself could certainly figure out a control system to stop them."

Torkel Jarl giggled again. "You tink it is dis engine makes der vind?" he asked, and I knew he was laughing at me. "Nah, nah! Look. Look close. I take der engine apart. Sec? Vat is inside? *Nudding*. It is der string makes der wind . . . der *knots* in der string."

"Huh!" I said, open-mouthed.

"You haf der brain, my friend, yah? So you I can talk to. Not like der Heimer Hans who catch me on der street so many weeks ago and try to talk to me. Him I tell nudding. So, please—hand me der book."

I gave him a fat volume from the dresser, and from the feel of its leather binding I could tell that it was very old.

Torkel Jarl opened it to the title page. "Olaus Magnus, der Swedish priest, my friend, yah? Der Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus. So old. Sixteen' Century. You read der Latin?"

I said a smattering.

"Now," he said, and tenderly turned yellow pages until he came to an old woodcut. The Latin caption said it was a Finnish sorcerer selling mariners the winds tied up in three knots of a rope.

"And see how it says," Torkel Jarl said, "how you untie der first knot, and get der stiff breeze; der second, you get der half gale; der t'ird, der hurricane." He grinned mischievously. "But no-blace it says how to tie der knots to poot der vind *in*. Me—" He tapped his forehead with a veined finger. "From der fadder and der gran'fadders in Finland before, *I know*."

Suddenly, the old man's wrinkled face saddened. "In der old days, der vind sorcerer made der good living. He had fine house, shoes for his children, der best food. He was a man of consequence. But today, all is disbelief. I tell der farmer, I tie der string to der vindmill and you haf vind and he laughs and says 'blah' and 'phoe'. But I tell him I haf der liddle engine to make der vind, and because he understands engines he buys dem like hotcakes—der sucker!"

I DON'T know how I ever got to sleep that night, thinking about that amazing old man. But the next morning I had things pretty well worked out in my mind. I arrived at the Samaritan House a little before nine, and darned if Gretchen wasn't already waiting in the lobby, just like she'd stepped from a field of daisies. But from the lift of her chin I could tell she hadn't forgiven me.

"What are you here for?" I asked.

"Merely to see," she said, and you could feel the ice coating her words, "that you don't pull any slick Wall Street deal on poor Mr. Heimer and poor Mr. Jarl."

"Poor my Aunt Hattie!" I grinned, and walked over to the clerk's desk and asked, "What's the next train for Sioux Falls?"

"Nine-thirty, sir," the clerk said.

"Thanks," I said. I knew the railroad station was only four blocks up Main Street—and I saw out of the corner of my eye that Gretchen was looking at me puzzled. I let her puzzle, and walked up to the big plate glass window and stared across the street to where the Samaritan State Bank stood.

Sure enough, just as I expected, the doors hadn't any more than opened for business on the dot of nine than smoothie Heimer turned up with a briefcase and went into the bank.

Twenty minutes later he came out, still clutching the briefcase, glanced up at the bank's clock, checked with his wristwatch, and then took off up the street at something between a fast walk and a trot.

I gave him a block's start, then called to Gretchen, "Want to see some fun?"

As I reached the street, I heard the train whistling into the station—and I knew then I'd made a mistake. Trains don't run on the split second. I started to run, and at the same time Helmer, a block ahead, started to run too. Behind me, I could hear the click-click of Gretchen's heels as she tried to keep up.

That Northwestern train doesn't stop more than two minutes at Samaritan. I'd done some running in college, and I'd played some football, but I was out of training; and this Helmer was plenty fast. I put on steam. Helmer kept a block ahead, and at the next intersection I lost ground when a car darn near ran into me. But at the last intersection, with one block still to go, Helmer started slowing down, and I saw why—that briefcase, knocking against his knees as he ran, acted as a brake.

He was still a dozen yards ahead of me as he swung into the station platform. The train was just pulling out, baggage cars first. Helmer made a beeline for a mid-

dle day coach, where a door was being held open for him by a conductor who'd seen him coming.

But just before Helmer reached it, I nailed him with the kind of flying tackle you read about on the sports pages.

The briefcase hit the brick platform, busted open, and bundles of greenbacks spilled every which way—Dad's, Gretchen's, her father's, and a lot of other folks' hard-earned dough.

I NEVER have told Gretchen how I learned, through my visit to Torkel Jarl, that Hans Helmer was a fake and that the Big Breeze Corporation could never become a going proposition. Somehow—although she easily swallows all that space travel stuff of the future—I don't think she'd believe in the magic of the past. I'm not sure I do, either.

Still (and this is a most curious thing), a few months after Gretchen and I settled down in our apartment in the East Sixties, Dad wrote that Torkel Jarl had died—and that all the windmills in the neighborhood had stopped.

"I wonder," Dad wrote, "whose lifetime he meant when he claimed the darned gadget would last that long?"

Franklin Grayson

Sorry

RIGHT NUMBER

By Richard Matheson

*Certainly a phone is a comfort
for a lonely old lady . . . as long as
there are people on the other end!*

JUST before the telephone rang, storm winds toppled the tree outside her window and jolted Miss Keene from her dreaming sleep. She flung herself up with a gasp, her frail hands crumpling twists of sheet in either palm. Beneath her fleshless chest the heart jerked taut, the sluggish blood spurted. She sat in rigid muteness, her eyes staring at the night.

Then, in another second, the telephone rang.

Who on earth? The question shaped unwittingly in her brain. Her thin hand faltered in the darkness, the fingers searching a moment and then Miss Elva Keene drew the cool receiver to her ear.

"Hello," she said.

Outside a cannon of thunder shook the night, twitching Miss Keene's crippled legs. *I've missed*

Illustrated by SUSSMAN

the voice, she thought, the thunder has blotted out the voice.

"Hello," she said again.

There was no sound. Miss Keene waited in expectant lethargy. Then she repeated, "Hel-lo," in a cracking voice. Outside the thunder crashed again.

Still no voice spoke, not even the sound of a phone being disconnected met her ears. Her wavering hand reached out and thumped down the receiver with an angry motion.

"Inconsideration," she muttered, thudding back on her pillow. Already her infirm back ached from the effort of sitting.

SHE forced out a weary breath. Now she'd have to suffer through the whole tormenting process of going to sleep again—the composing of jaded muscles, the ignoring of abrasive pain in her legs, the endless, frustrating struggle to turn off the faucet in her brain and keep unwanted thoughts from dripping. Oh, well, it had to be done; Nurse Phillips insisted on proper rest. Elva Keene breathed slowly and deeply, drew the covers to her chin and labored hopefully for sleep.

In vain.

Her eyes opened and, turning her face to the window, she watched the storm move off on lightning legs. *Why can't I sleep, she fretted, why must I always lie*

here awake like this?

She knew the answer without effort. When a life was dull, the smallest element added seemed unnaturally intriguing. And life for Miss Keene was the sorry pattern of lying flat or being propped on pillows, reading books which Nurse Phillips brought from the town library, getting nourishment, rest, medication, listening to her tiny radio—and waiting, waiting for something different to happen.

Like the telephone call that wasn't a call.

There hadn't even been the sound of a receiver replaced in its cradle. Miss Keene didn't understand that. Why would anyone call her exchange and then listen silently while she said "Hello" over and over again? *Had it actually been anyone calling?*

What she should have done, she realized then, was to keep listening until the other person tired of the joke and put down the receiver. What she should have done was to speak out forcefully about the inconsideration of a prankish call to a crippled maiden lady, in the middle of a stormy night. Then, if there *had* been someone listening, whoever it was would have been properly chastened by her angry words and . . .

"Well, of course."

She said it aloud in the darkness, punctuating the sentence with a cluck of somewhat relieved

disgust. Of course, the telephone was out of order. Someone had tried to contact her, perhaps Nurse Phillips to see if she were all right. But the other end of the line had broken down in some way, allowing her phone to ring but no verbal communication to be made. Well, of course, that was the case.

MISS KEENE nodded once and closed her eyes gently. *Now to sleep*, she thought. Far away, beyond the county, the storm cleared its murky throat. *I hope no one is worrying*, Elva Keene thought, *that would be too bad*.

She was thinking that when the telephone rang again.

There, she thought, *they are trying to reach me again*. She reached out hurriedly in the darkness, fumbled until she felt the receiver, then pulled it to her ear.

"Hello," said Miss Keene.

Silence.

Her throat contracted. She knew what was wrong, of course, but she didn't like it, no, not at all.

"Hello?" she said, tentatively, not yet certain that she was wasting breath.

There was no reply. She waited a moment, then spoke a third time, a little impatiently now, loudly, her shrill voice ringing in the dark bedroom. "Hello!"

Nothing. Miss Keene had the sudden urge to fling the receiver away. She forced down that curi-

ous instinct—no, she must wait; wait and listen to hear if anyone hung up the phone on the other end of the line.

So she waited.

The bedroom was very quiet now, but Elva Keene kept straining to hear; either the sound of a receiver going down or the buzz which usually follows. Her chest rose and fell in delicate lurches, she closed her eyes in concentration, then opened them again and blinked at the darkness. There was no sound from the telephone; not a click, not a buzz, not a sound of someone putting down a receiver.

"Hello!" she cried suddenly, then pushed away the receiver.

She missed her target. The receiver dropped and thumped once on the rug. Miss Keene nervously clicked on the lamp, wincing as the leprous bulb light filled her eyes. Quickly, she lay on her side and tried to reach the silent, voiceless telephone.

But she couldn't stretch far enough and crippled legs prevented her from rising. Her throat tightened. My God, must she leave it there all night, silent and mystifying?

Remembering then, she reached out abruptly and pressed the cradle arm. On the floor, the receiver clicked, then began to buzz normally. Elva Keene swallowed and drew in a shaking breath as

she slumped back on her pillow.

She threw out books of reason then and pulled herself back from panic. *This is, ridiculous*, she thought, *getting upset over such a trivial and easily explained incident. It was the storm, the night, the way in which I'd been shocked from sleep (What was it that had awakened me?) all these things piled on the mountain of teeth-grinding monotony that's my life. Yes, it was bad, very bad. But it wasn't the incident that was bad, it was her reaction to it.*

Miss Elva Keene numbed herself to further premonitions. *I shall sleep now*, she ordered her body with a petulant shake. She lay very still and relaxed. From the floor she could hear the telephone buzzing like the drone of far-off bees. She ignored it.

EARLY the next morning, after Nurse Phillips had taken away the breakfast dishes, Elva Keene called the telephone company.

"This is Miss Elva," she told the operator.

"Oh, yes, Miss Elva," said the operator, a Miss Finch. "Can I help you?"

"Last night my telephone rang twice," said Elva Keene. "But when I answered it, no one spoke. And I didn't hear any receiver drop. I didn't even hear a dial tone—just silence."

"Well, I'll tell you, Miss Elva,"

said the cheery voice of Miss Finch, "that storm last night just about ruined half our service. We're being flooded with calls about knocked down lines and bad connections. I'd say you're pretty lucky your phone is working at all."

"Then you think it was probably a bad connection," prompted Miss Keene, "caused by the storm?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Elva, that's all."

"Do you think it will happen again?"

"Oh, it may," said Miss Finch. "It may. I really couldn't tell you, Miss Elva. But if it does happen again, you just call me and then I'll have one of our men check on it."

"All right," said Miss Elva. "Thank you, dear."

She lay on her pillows all morning in a relaxed torpor. *It gives one a satisfied feeling*, she thought, *to solve a mystery, slight as it is. It had been a terrible storm that caused the bad connection. And no wonder when it had even knocked down the ancient oak tree beside the house. That was the noise that had awakened me of course, and a pity it was that the dear tree had fallen. How it shaded the house in hot summer months. Oh, well, I suppose I should be grateful*, she thought, *that the tree fell across the road and not across the house.*



The day passed uneventfully, an amalgam of eating, reading Angela Thirkell and the mail (two throw-away advertisements and the light bill) plus brief chats with Nurse Phillips. Indeed, routine had set in so properly that when the telephone rang early that evening, she picked it up without even thinking.

"Hello," she said.

Silence.

It brought her back for a second. Then she called Nurse Phillips.

"What is it?" asked the portly woman as she trudged across the bedroom rug.

"This is what I was telling you about," said Elva Keene, holding out the receiver. "Listen!"

Nurse Phillips took the receiver in her hand and pushed back gray locks with the earpiece. Her placid face remained placid. "There's nobody there," she observed.

"That's right," said Miss Keene. "That's right. Now you just listen and see if you can hear a receiver being put down. I'm sure you won't."

Nurse Phillips listened for a moment, then shook her head. "I don't hear anything," she said and hung up.

"Oh, wait!" Miss Keene said hurriedly. "Oh, well, it doesn't matter," she added, seeing it was already down. "If it happens too often, I'll just call Miss Finch and

they'll have a repairman check on it."

"I see," Nurse Phillips said and went back to the living room and Faith Baldwin.

NURSE Phillips left the house at eight, leaving on the bedside table, as usual, an apple, a cookie, a glass of water and the bottle of pills. She puffed up the pillows behind Miss Keene's fragile back, moved the radio and telephone a little closer to the bed, looked around complacently, then turned for the door, saying, "I'll see you tomorrow."

It was fifteen minutes later when the telephone rang. Miss Keene picked up the receiver quickly. She didn't bother saying hello this time—she just listened.

At first it was the same—an absolute silence. She listened a moment more, impatiently. Then, on the verge of replacing the receiver she heard the sound. Her cheek twitched, she jerked the telephone back to her ear.

"Hello?" she asked, tensely.

A murmuring, a dull humming, a rustling sound—what was it? Miss Keene shut her eyes tightly, listening hard, but she couldn't identify the sound; it was too soft, too undefined. It deviated from a sort of whining vibration . . . to an escape of air . . . to a bubbling sibilance. *It must be the sound of the connection*, she thought, *it*

must be the telephone itself making the noise. Perhaps a wire blowing in the wind somewhere, perhaps . . .

She stopped thinking then. She stopped breathing. The sound had ceased. Once more, silence rang in her ears. She could feel the heartbeats stumbling in her chest again, the walls of her throat closing in. *Oh, this is ridiculous, she told herself, I've already been through this—it was the storm, the storm!*

She lay back on her pillows, the receiver pressed to her ear, nervous breaths faltering from her nostrils. She could feel unreasoning dread rise like a tide within her, despite all attempts at sane deduction. Her mind kept slipping off the glassy perch of reason; she kept falling deeper and deeper.

Now she shuddered violently as the sounds began again. They couldn't possibly be human sounds, she knew, and yet there was something about them, some inflection, some almost identifiable arrangement of . . .

Her lips shook and a whine began to hover in her throat. But she couldn't put down the telephone, she simply couldn't. The sounds held her hypnotized. Whether they were the rise and fall of the wind or the muttering of faulty mechanisms, she didn't know, but they would not let her go.

"Hello?" she murmured, shakily.

The sounds rose in volume. They rattled and shook in her brain.

"Hello!" she screamed.

"H-e-l-l-o," answered a voice on the telephone. Then Miss Keene fainted dead away.

"ARE you certain it was someone saying *hello*?" Miss Finch asked Miss Elva over the telephone. "It might have been the connection, you know."

"I tell you it was a *man*!" a shaking Elva Keene screeched. "It was the same man who kept listening to me say *hello* over and over and over again without answering me back. The same one who made terrible noises over the telephone!"

Miss Finch cleared her throat politely. "Well, I'll have a man check your line, Miss Elva, as soon as he can. Of course, the men are very busy now with all the repairs on storm wreckage, but as soon as it's possible . . ."

"And what am I going to do if this — this *person* calls again?"

"You just hang up on him, Miss Elva."

"But he keeps calling!"

"Well." Miss Finch's affability wavered. "Why don't you find out who he is, Miss Elva? If you can do that, why, we can take immediate action, you see and . . ."

After she'd hung up, Miss Keene lay against the pillows tensely, listening to Nurse Phillips sing busky love songs over the breakfast dishes. Miss Finch didn't believe her story, that was apparent. Miss Finch thought she was a nervous old woman falling prey to imagination. Well, Miss Finch would find out differently.

"I'll just keep calling her and calling her until she *does*," she said irritably to Nurse Phillips just before afternoon nap.

"You just do that," said Nurse Phillips. "Now take your pill and lie down."

Miss Keene lay in grumpy silence, her vein-rutted hands knotted at her sides. It was ten after two and, except for the bubbling of Nurse Phillips' front room snores, the house was silent in the October afternoon. *It makes me angry*, thought Elva Keene, *that no one will take this seriously. Well, her thin lips pressed together, the next time the telephone rings I'll make sure that Nurse Phillips listens until she does hear something.*

Exactly then the phone rang.

Miss Keene felt a cold tremor lace down her body. Even in the daylight with sunbeams speckling her flowered coverlets, the strident ringing frightened her. She dug porcelain teeth into her lower lip to steady it. *Shall I answer it?* the question came and then, be-

fore she could even think to answer, her hand picked up the receiver. A deep ragged breath; she drew the phone slowly to her ear. She said, "Hello?"

The voice answered back, "Hello?"—hollow and inanimate.

"Who is this?" Miss Keene asked, trying to keep her throat clear.

"Hello?"

"Who's calling, please?"

"Hello?"

"Is anyone there?"

"Hello?"

"Please. . . I"

"Hello?"

MISS KEENE jammed down the receiver and lay on her bed trembling violently, unable to catch her breath. *What is it*, begged her mind, *what in God's name is it?*

"Margaret!" she cried. "Margaret!"

In the front room she heard Nurse Phillips grunt abruptly and then start coughing.

"Margaret, please . . .!"

Elva Keene heard the large-bodied woman rise to her feet and trudge across the living room floor. *I must compose myself*, she told herself, fluttering hands to her fevered cheeks, *I must tell her exactly what happened, exactly.*

"What is it?" grumbled the nurse. "Does your stomach ache?"

Miss Keene's throat drew in tautly as she swallowed. "He just

called again," she whispered.

"Who?"

"That man!"

"What man?"

"The one who keeps calling!"

Miss Keene cried. "He keeps saying hello over and over again. That's all he says—hello, hello, hel . . ."

"Now stop this," Nurse Phillips scolded stolidly. "Lie back and . . ."

"I don't want to lie back!" she said frenziedly. "I want to know who this terrible person is who keeps frightening me!"

"Now don't work yourself into a state," warned Nurse Phillips. "You know how upset your stomach gets."

Miss Keene began to sob bitterly. "I'm afraid. I'm afraid of him. Why does he keep calling me?"

Nurse Phillips stood by the bed looking down in bovine inertia. "Now, what did Miss Finch tell you?" she said, softly.

Miss Keene's shaking lips could not frame the answer.

"Did she tell you it was the connection?" the nurse soothed. "Did she?"

"But it isn't! It's a man, a man!"

Nurse Phillips expelled a patient breath. "If it's a man," she said, "then just hang up. You don't have to talk to him. Just hang up. Is that so hard to do?"

Miss Keene shut tear-bright eyes and forced her lips into a twitching line. In her mind the man's subdued and listless voice kept echoing. Over and over, the inflection never altering, the question never deferring to her replies—just repeating itself endlessly in doleful apathy. *Hello? Hello?* Making her shudder to the heart.

"Look," Nurse Phillips spoke.

She opened her eyes and saw the blurred image of the nurse putting the receiver down on the table.

"There," Nurse Phillips said, "nobody can call you now. You leave it that way. If you need anything all you have to do is dial. Now isn't that all right? Isn't it?"

Miss Keene looked bleakly at her nurse. Then, after a moment, she nodded once. Grudgingly.

SHE lay in the dark bedroom, the sound of the dial tone humming in her ear; keeping her awake. *Or am I just telling myself that?* she thought. *Is it really keeping me awake? Didn't I sleep that first night with the receiver off the hook? No, it wasn't the sound, it was something else.*

She closed her eyes obdurately. *I won't listen, she told herself, I just won't listen to it.* She drew in trembling breaths of the night. But the darkness would not fill her brain and blot away the sound.

Miss Keene felt around on the

bed until she found her bed jacket. She draped it over the receiver, swathing its black smoothness in woolly turns. Then she sank back again, stern breathed and taut. *I will sleep, she demanded, I will sleep.*

She heard it still.

Her body grew rigid and abruptly, she unfolded the receiver from its thick wrappings and slammed it down angrily on the cradle. Silence filled the room with delicious peace. Miss Keene fell back on the pillow with a feeble groan. *Now to sleep, she thought.*

And the telephone rang.

Her breath snuffed off. The ringing seemed to permeate the darkness, surrounding her in a cloud of ear-lancing vibration. She reached out to put the receiver on the table again, then jerked her hand back with a gasp, realizing she would hear the man's voice again.

Her throat pulsed nervously. *What I'll do, she planned, what I'll do is take off the receiver very quickly—very quickly—and put it down, then push down on the arm and cut off the line. Yes, that's what I'll do!*

She tensed herself and spread her hand out cautiously until the ringing phone was under it. Then, breath held, she followed her plan, slashed off the ring, reached quickly for the cradle arm . . .

And stopped, frozen, as the

man's voice reached out through darkness to her ears. "Where are you?" he asked. "I want to talk to you."

Claws of ice clamped down on Miss Keene's shuddering chest. She lay petrified, unable to cut off the sound of the man's dull, expressionless voice, asking: "Where are you? I want to talk to you."

A sound from Miss Keene's throat, thin and fluttering.

And the man said, "Where are you? I want to talk to you."

"No, no," sobbed Miss Keene.

"Where are you? I want to . . ."

She pressed the cradle arm with taut white fingers. She held it down for fifteen minutes before letting it go.

"I tell you I won't have it!"

Miss Keene's voice was a frayed ribbon of sound. She sat inflexibly on the bed, straining her frightened anger through the mouthpiece vents.

"You say you bang up on this man and he still calls?" Miss Finch inquired.

"I've explained all that!" Elva Keene burst out. "I had to leave the receiver off the phone all night so he wouldn't call. And the buzzing kept me awake. I didn't get a wink of sleep! Now, I want this line checked, do you hear me? I want you to stop this terrible thing!"

Her eyes were like hard, dark beads. The phone almost slipped from her palsied fingers.

"All right, Miss Elva," said the operator. "I'll send a man out today."

"Thank you, dear, thank you," Miss Keene said. "Will you call me when. . . ."

Her voice stopped abruptly as a clicking sound started on the telephone.

"The line is busy," she announced.

The clicking stopped and she went on. "To repeat, will you let me know when you find out who this terrible person is?"

"Surely, Miss Elva, surely. And I'll have a man check your telephone this afternoon. You're at 127 Mill Lane, aren't you?"

"That's right, dear. You will see to it, won't you?"

"I promise faithfully, Miss Elva. First thing today."

"Thank you, dear," Miss Keene said, drawing in relieved breath.

There were no calls from the man all that morning, none that afternoon. Her tightness slowly began to loosen. She played a game of cribbage with Nurse Phillips and even managed a little laughter. It was comforting to know that the telephone company was working on it now. They'd soon catch that awful man and bring back her peace of mind.

But when two o'clock came,

then three o'clock—and still no repairman at her house—Miss Keene began worrying again.

"What's the *matter* with that girl?" she said pettishly. "She promised me faithfully that a man would come this afternoon."

"He'll be here," Nurse Phillips said. "Be patient."

FOUR o'clock arrived and no man. Miss Keene would not play cribbage, read her book or listen to her radio. What had begun to loosen was tightening again, increasing minute by minute until at five o'clock, when the telephone rang, her hand spurted out rigidly from the flaring sleeve of her bed jacket and clamped down like a claw on the receiver. *If the man speaks*, raced her mind, *if he speaks I'll scream until my heart stops*.

She pulled the receiver to her ear. "Hello?"

"Miss Elva, this is Miss Finch."

Her eyes closed and breath fluttered through her lips. "Yes?" she said.

"About those calls you say you've been receiving."

"Yes?" In her mind, Miss Finch's words cutting—"those calls you say you've been receiving."

"We sent a man out to trace them," continued Miss Finch. "I have his report here."

Miss Keene caught her breath. "Yes?"

"He couldn't find anything."

Elva Keene didn't speak. Her gray head lay motionless on the pillow, the receiver pressed to her ear.

"He says he traced the—the difficulty to a fallen wire on the edge of town."

"Fallen—wire?"

"Yes, Miss Elva." Miss Finch did not sound happy.

"You're telling me I didn't hear anything?"

Miss Finch's voice was firm. "There's no way anyone could have phoned you from that location," she said.

"I tell you a *man* called me!"

Miss Finch was silent and Miss Keene's fingers tightened convulsively on the receiver.

"There must be a phone there," she insisted. "There must be *some* way that man was able to call me."

"Miss Elva, the wire is lying on the ground." She paused. "Tomorrow, our crew will put it back up and you won't be . . ."

"There *has* to be a way he could call me!"

"Miss Elva, there's no one out there."

"Out where, *where?*"

The operator said, "Miss Elva, it's the cemetery."

remain for the night; her nurse had patted her and scolded her and ignored her.

She was waiting for a telephone call.

She could have disconnected the phone, but she had not the will. She lay there waiting, waiting, thinking.

Of the silence—of ears that had not heard, seeking to hear again. Of sounds bubbling and muttering—the first stumbling attempts at speech by one who had not spoken — how long? Of — *hello? hello?*—first greeting by one long silent. Of — *where are you?* Of (that which made her lie so rigidly) the clicking and the operator speaking her address. Of—

The telephone ringing.

A pause. Ringing. The rustle of a nightgown in the dark.

The ringing stopped.

Listening.

And the telephone slipping from white fingers, the eyes staring, the thin heartbeats slowly pulsing.

Outside, the cricket-rattling night.

Inside, the words still sounding in her brain—giving terrible meaning to the heavy, choking silence.

"Hello, Miss Elva, I'll be right over."

IN the black silence of her bedroom, a crippled maiden lady lay waiting. Her nurse would not

Richard Matheson

My Darling Hecate

By WYMAN GUIN

*Einstein hath no
formula for the fury
of a woman scorned!*



ONE time when my wife and I were kids, I packed a hard, icy snowball out on the steps of the Clearview grade school and threw it at her. Just as it got to her, it zoomed or bobbed up over her. After that, ballistically reformed, it went straight through a school window.

The sheriff was there—I mean he was a little boy then—and he looked at me in disgust. "If you gotta throw at girls, why don't you hit 'em? Then I can hit you."

I didn't pay any attention to him. I didn't mind either that I would get a lecture about the broken window. I figured I had made a discovery—my good self must have put that miraculous pitch into my arm to keep my bad self from hitting the pretty little girl.

When the principal let me go, I went home and got my baseball. Out in the back yard, I imagined her standing about ten feet from the garage. Her neat red hair

gleamed from under her snowcap and her sweet small face smiled at me. Then I began to throw at her with every grip and windup I could think of.

Although I could imagine her as my target just as clear as a picture, not even a spitball thrown underhand would repeat that bobbing zoom. Finally my arm ached so I could hardly move it and I was too tired and disgusted to go on. Right then, as innocent as you please, she wandered into our yard in her little green snowsuit.

Well, I let my bad self aim directly at her. That ball performed a sinusoidal hump just as the snowball had and I gave up my dream of pitching for the Yanks. They certainly wouldn't let me use her head for home plate.

I STILL thought egocentrically that the power which had curved the ball was in my arm, and as the years went by, there

Illustrated by EMMH



were a lot more things like that which I misinterpreted. For example, she never kept me waiting for a date. I'd call her any time it occurred to me and she would say, "I'll be ready in ten minutes." Not fifteen minutes or an hour. Ten minutes.

I just took it for granted that she was always able to get ready that fast because a date with me was important to her. I guess her father looked at it like that, too. He would open the massive front door for me and the skin about his pale blue eyes would crinkle. He would reach out and rumple my hair the way he had since I was a kid and he would say, "Son, you must have something I never had. Her mother, bless her memory, would fuss all afternoon getting ready for a date and then keep me waiting an hour when I got there. Go on in. She's in the living room."

And there she would be, cool and lovely, gowned like a goddess. Her father would follow me in and stand beside me, shaking his lean head. "She was in blue-jeans ten minutes ago."

She would toss her copper hair emphatically. "Father, all you have to do if you're in a hurry is concentrate on what you're doing. Then everything works out for you."

She could say that as if it were more fundamental than Newton's

laws of motion and gravity.

And that was the way it was after we were married. She just concentrated on what she was doing and it was a marvel to all our friends how easy it was for her to keep an immaculate home and do all the things she did. My wife never could understand why other women needed maids.

Even with the mysterious things that happened occasionally, I never caught on. Like the time we had a late afternoon cocktail party that just about wrecked the place, and as the last guest stumbled down the drive to his car and waiting wife, the phone rang. Friends from the city were coming out to con a country dinner from us.

My wife was looking as fresh and lovely as she had before the boys began trying to manhandle her. "Now, darling. It won't be difficult if we just concentrate on what we're doing. You get the cocktail glasses and canape trays from the living room and I'll see about the kitchen."

Well, I went into the living room and wandered around and there weren't any glasses or trays. There were cigarette ashes sleeted across the carpet and wet rings on all the furniture but the biggest part of the mess had disappeared.

I went back to the kitchen and my wife wasn't there. The automatic dishwasher was splashing away, however. I went out into

the game room and there was my wife casually straightening up a few things and humming happily to herself.

"There *aren't* any glasses in the living room."

She looked at me sort of funny. Then she laughed lightly. "Oh, I must have been gathering them up while everybody was putting on their coats."

"You were helping with their coats."

"Was I? Well, not all the time, I guess."

GOING to the service room, I got the vacuum sweeper and a damp cloth and returned to the living room. That carpet wasn't nearly as dirty as I had thought when I first looked at it. In fact, it wasn't dirty at all. The rings on the furniture had all dried up and disappeared, too. I looked around the room and it seemed just fine. Even the smoke was out of the air.

I took the sweeper and the cloth back to the service room and returned to the game room to help her there. The room was immaculate and my wife wasn't around. I finally found her in the kitchen.

"You're difficult to keep up with," I complained.

"Darling, I'm sorry about the glasses in the living room. Sometimes, when I've already done something like that, it seems to me

I've only thought about doing it. You know what I mean?"

"No, I've never had that trouble."

"Well, quite often I can't remember whether I've really done a thing or only thought about doing it. I have to go look to find out. Of course," and she laughed with embarrassment at her conceit, "I'm such a good housekeeper, I almost always find I've really done whatever it was."

All the time she talked, her hands were working busily on the kitchen counter.

"Are you going to give our guests chicken sandwiches?"

"No, these are for us. There's the dinner over there."

She had taken steaks and vegetables out of the freezer and these were stacked neatly on a work-counter in the impeccable kitchen.

"When did you find time to go down to the basement?"

"Oh, I don't remember. When you were in the living room, I think. Here's your sandwich, darling. I thought we ought to have a snack before they arrive. They'll probably want some cocktails before dinner."

You see how it was. She just concentrated and things worked out for her. But when everyone in Clearview got to talking about that girl and me, you might say that, for the first time in her life, my wife did some *furious* con-

centrating on something.

I suppose I was taking quite an interest in that girl. She lives in Clearview where my wife and I went to grade school. It's a little village about three miles up the road from where we now live in the country. I drive through Clearview to my work in the city, and the way this thing started, I was to bring this girl home from the city in the evenings. In the mornings, she left for work earlier than I and would take the bus. But in the evenings—and it was my wife's confident idea—I was to bring her from her work in the city to her home in Clearview.

Which I always did.

PROBABLY I drove slower coming home those evenings. She enjoyed music and the current novels and it was pleasant talking with her. She had a way of turning sideways in the seat and leaning back against the car door to watch me while I was driving.

"You know, there aren't many people in Clearview I can talk with about things like this," she said. "I think it was wonderful of your wife to arrange for me to ride with you."

"It has been fun."

"Don't you think there are things like this that can change your whole life? I mean you meet someone interesting and adult and, as you talk with them, your point

of view is changed for the rest of your life."

I put the car through a curve and then straightened it carefully on the singing pavement. "Yes, I've found it that way."

She sighed and leaned her pretty blonde head back against the window so that, when I glanced at her, her smooth throat curved beautifully up to her tilted chin. She had eyes like Ingrid Bergman's and now they stared dreamily into the dusk that gathered over the highway ahead.

"I want to know many wonderful people and know them intimately so that, when I am old, I will have all those deep moments to remember."

Naturally, we stopped on occasions for a cocktail or two. And of course that New Year's Eve, as we came out of that little bar, I flipped a coin sort of casually and it fell the wrong way. So I had to kiss her a few times.

But here was still no justification for everyone in Clearview to start talking. Especially to my wife.

My wife is an even-tempered girl except when she explodes, and she let things run along that way until spring, which I suppose she considered the dangerous time because she was thinking of goats. She was pleasant to me. But her manner was getting grim except when she spoke directly to me. I didn't

stop for any more cocktails with that girl, but I might as well have, because the talk at the big end of the funnel in Clearview didn't slow down.

So, one night, my wife had had a few cocktails herself and she slammed the cards onto the table so hard that I got the whole suit of hearts in my eye. Now that I think back, she looked like the goddess Hecate storming the wild uplands of Greece on a roundup of faithless lovers. At the time, I was only dismayed to find the goddess talking like a fishwife.

"Well, I've heard it from everyone else. Now I'd like to hear it from you. What goes with you and this girl?"

You know, sometimes I wonder about myself. What do you think I said? I said, "What girl?"

She assumed an enormous calm like an ocean swell coming at me. "You," she said, "are a goat."

You see, I had guessed that was why she was waiting till spring, and this foresight, this grasp of the way she would be thinking, put me on my feet.

"I have done absolutely nothing wrong," I asserted calmly.

THE pyrotechnics mounted as we dashed on into the gloomier stages of "the lovers' quarrel." But she dwelt on certain painful factors and concluded that I was incapable of doing wrong. Finally,

too, she excused the other girl for being attracted to me.

"You see, darling, I married you myself," she explained. "I can't afford to call that little pot black."

What intensified the flush on her cheeks and put that new glitter into her beautiful eyes was the insufferable damage to her pride from the tongues of the town.

Our quarrel was over and it hadn't been anything to what came now. I had never seen my wife like this. Fascinated, I watched her grapple the women of Clearview on the cruel hooks of her words. She snapped off their clay feet and jerked the straw out of their heads before hurling them into her raging sea of venom.

Like a chip, I was swept up and tossed out with a hapless group of gossips.

"If their own marriages weren't such miserable failures, they would have ignored your antics with that little idiot as I did."

I floated forlornly where she had tossed me. Far off, I could see her superb little figure, now tensed, now gesticulating, as the surf of words recoiled for more power and then came boiling at me. There on the rocking shore she ground the bitter meat she had been after.

They didn't respect her taste. In clothes. In antiques. In homes. I floated near her for a kind word and a tear because they didn't

respect her taste in husbands, either. But she had forgotten that small matter.

She didn't let up when we went to bed. I turned out the lights. During a pause in her fury, I dozed. I came half-eyed awake with my wife sitting up in her bed concentrating on a mad mutter.

"I'll blot out the town! I'll blot out the whole town!"

There was a rolling boom of thunder that wasn't thunder. There was a brittle shifting in the foundation of the universe and, for a stunning moment, everything about us was lighted from within. We stared at each other in that stealthy shimmer and abruptly it was dark.

I lay there wondering what on earth had happened. After a long time I heard her hushed, quavering voice.

"Darling?"

"Yes, honey?"

"What—what do you think that was?"

"It must have been an explosion somewhere. Look, honey, I'm awfully sorry about this whole thing. We're both exhausted, so let's go to sleep and maybe in the morning you'll feel like making it up."

"I'd like to make it up now."

I flew over there like an eager spithall. Her face was still flaming and it made her lips hot and yielding. She whispered wonderful things to me and I whispered things I had never had occasion to think

of before. We kissed good night and I got back to my bed.

And lay there for a long time wondering what the hell had happened.

NEXT morning, that dark oath and that vast booming were only part of a bad dream that was happily forgotten. I did not once think of them. We had a fine breakfast and said more wonderful things and I drove off to work marveling that she loved me enough to get that angry.

I drove along Highway 35 whistling the songs I knew and thinking about how lucky my wife and I were to be married to each other. Driving along that way, not paying attention to anything but the hypnotic road, I stopped whistling and broke out in a sweat.

I pulled over to the shoulder.

A meadow lark was singing off to the left. From ahead I could hear another car approaching with a leisurely hum. I knew this spot on Highway 35. I had driven over it a thousand times. Back about a mile, the road went through Clearview. But this morning it hadn't.

The approaching car went by me, a fellow driving alone in a Packard. I started my engine and turned around and followed him back. When he topped the overpass at the North Central tracks, I was about 300 feet behind him. I saw his brake lights go on and

he edged to the shoulder as he started down off the bridge.

Instead of making a sharp S-turn through Clearview and south around the village square, Highway 35 stretched ahead, a clean wide sweep to the south through open fields.

Where Highway 17 came in from the northwest to intersect, there was a filling station, a general store and a couple of houses I had never seen before. There were two big farms with handsome dairy barns along the near shore of Shadow Lake.

There should have been summer cottages scattered through there. There should have been the streets and buildings of Clearview, half-hidden in trees, running from there nearly to where the Packard was parked on the approach to the overpass.

The driver ahead had gotten out and was flagging me down. I crawled up behind him with my motor idling and he walked back to me.

There was a truculent air about him, as if somebody had just handed him a lead half-dollar. "Say, I don't drive this route very often, but I thought Clearview was right along in here."

I nodded, staring down the slope at the gasoline station. That was the logical place to ask directions, but I wasn't any more anxious than he seemed to be to stop in.

"Weren't you the guy parked on the shoulder about a mile back?"

I nodded again. I was feeling too sick and frightened to talk to him or collect my thoughts.

"Well, why did you come back?"

"Listen," I snapped, "if you've lost your way, that's the man you want to talk to." I indicated the filling station where the attendant had come out and was talking to the driver of a big farm truck.

He turned without another word and got into his car.

AFTER a while, I put my car in gear and rolled slowly behind him down the wide-sweeping curve. Above the strangely empty fields, white-winged gulls turned and flashed toward Shadow Lake.

There was no sharp break between what I was familiar with and what was new, mostly things were just missing. There was no sign of violence except that some telephone lines were down. Along the North Central tracks, I saw a place where the rails ended, and then, three feet to the east, started again and came on my way. The shabby little depot was gone, too.

I pulled into the filling station behind the Packard and got out. As I did so, the driver of the farm truck was walking away up Highway 17. He was not much more than a boy and, as he walked past me, I could see his face was

pale. Around his mouth and on his cheeks, it made him look yellow.

The filling station attendant called after him, "Hey, come back here and get your truck!"

The boy walked on up Highway 17 without turning. The attendant threw his mystification and annoyance at us.

"That guy has been driving me crazy since five o'clock this morning. Says he can't find his dad's farm where he was taking this load of feed. Drives out around Shadow Lake and in fifteen minutes he's back wringing his hands and swearing at me. Now he leaves his truck parked smack in my

drive and walks off."

We stood for a moment looking after the crazy boy walking away up Highway 17.

"Well," the attendant broke the silence, "them's my troubles, I guess. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

The driver of the Packard came to himself. "Yes," he said in a businesslike hurry. "I'm looking for Clearview."

The attendant stopped in the middle of his smile. His pale blue eyes narrowed to slits that glared at us from his weathered face. "Now," he whispered levelly, "that's enough. What is this? A



mass break from the hughouse? You're the ninth one this morning, including a damned fool bus driver."

He walked stiff-legged into the station and came out with a road map. "So you're headed for Clearview? Well, you can see right here it ain't in this state." He almost put his finger through the map.

I studied the section where it should have been, but there was no Clearview indicated. Otherwise his map seemed all right.

The driver of the Packard was frightened now. "It wasn't Clearview I was trying to get to."

The filling station attendant

looked at the man for a long time. Then he began to tremble about his chin. Finally he asked quietly, "Where did you want to go, mister?"

"Oaktown."

"I see. Well, you get into your car quietly and drive on down the road about six miles and you'll be in Oaktown."

"Thanks. I hope you're right."

WHEN the Packard sped away, a big "simi" slowed on the highway. The driver leaned from his cab and yelled at us, "Hey, bud, am I still on Highway 35?"

The attendant nodded and



waved him along. He was definitely suspicious when he turned to me. "And you?"

"I represent Darrow Chemicals," I lied. "We have a new line we'd like to get distribution on through here."

"Come on in the station and let's have a smoke while we talk."

I followed him in, saying, "Where do you suppose he got that idea about a town named Clearview?"

"That's his problem, mister. All I know is there ain't such a place." He lit my cigarette for me.

There was something incongruously familiar about him. I fumbled around in my mind, but I didn't hit on it. Perhaps the clothes and the weathered face threw me off.

A little girl with bright red hair came from the living quarters in back of the station and leaned against the door jamb, staring at me. The attendant grinned. "My daughter. Cute, ain't she?"

"Hello. What's your name?"

She wasn't going to answer foolish questions.

"Hecate," the attendant supplied. "Odd name, but common in these parts."

"How long have you lived here?" I asked him.

"Well, now, that's not an easy one to answer, son." For a moment he bunted frantically in my eyes for something too big for

him to grasp. "All my life, I guess."

I stared at him.

He shook his head in embarrassment, but he grinned confidently. "Lots of mysterious things, aren't there? A man could worry if he was a mind to."

"How do you mean, mysterious?"

"Oh, I don't know. Like my wife, for instance. Are you married?"

I nodded. Over his shoulder, I could see through the window to where a man in a business suit wandered aimlessly in a field that stretched toward Shadow Lake. I recognized him. He lived out in the country, but he had owned a store in Clearview.

The attendant questioned me and his voice was very serious. "How old is your wife?"

"Two years younger than I am. About twenty-eight."

He spoke slowly and contemptuously, as if he were entranced by a problem he couldn't think out. "That's how I thought it ought to be. You see, my wife is eighty-seven."

I could only gape at him. He himself was no more than thirty-six. Then I thought of the little red-bearded girl and glanced at her and back to him.

He sighed deeply. "She's my wife's daughter."

The child turned away slowly,

with her eyes lingering on me, and then she darted back into the living quarters.

BOTH of us became aware of sirens approaching from the direction of the city. Two troopers on motorcycles led a squad car down the hill and up to the station. They cut their motors and calmly stood their machines while three plainclothes men and another in uniform got out of the car. The sirens died down a melancholy scale on the quiet spring air.

One of the plainclothes men led the group from the car up to the station.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, as though he intended to put a stop to it in the next ten minutes.

"Nothing's going on here." The attendant displayed a native attitude of uncooperative independence.

"Where's Clearview?"

I saw the attendant wince. For the first time, he doubted himself. It crashed him in one instant from his isolated confidence.

"I tell you there ain't such a place. There never was. I'm a native here and I never heard of such a place."

He began to cry and sat down on the step, blabbering into a handkerchief.

The troopers had remained by their machines. One of them spoke

to the other, and over the weeping of the attendant, I could hear his undisturbed voice. "I never been out this way. Is it really changed?"

"I sure guess it is. I can't figure it out. Nothing has happened as far as I can see, except the town is gone."

The plainclothes man turned to me. "What are you doing here?"

"I live over there."

"Where's 'over there'?"

"Blue Lake. I live on the lake."

"Have business here this morning?"

"I was on my way to work in the city. I—Clearview is gone."

"I can see that for myself. What did you have to do with it?"

"I called my partner east from Tucumcari, New Mexico. We moved the whole thing, men, women and children, to a spot I had picked in western Oregon. We didn't finish till around daylight and I'm dog-tired."

I started for my car, but one of the men grabbed my arm. "Just a moment, mister. You may be an honestly mystified American citizen like the rest of us. On the other hand, this may be a Communist plot and we can't take chances."

"I thought of that, too," I said. "I decided they wouldn't bother planting spies if they could pull off a neat trick like this. Do you reckon there's anyone straighten-

ing out a hangover in Washington, D. C., this morning?"

"All we got to deal with is Clearview," he said sullenly.

I was over being angry. That crack about my partner and me not finishing till daylight had rung a little bell that had grown in volume while I talked, until now it was pealing and clanging across my frightened mind. For the first time that morning, I was remembering the awful oath my wife had muttered the night before, that vast booming and that shimmering light in everything.

I BEGAN to look as guilty and scared as hell, but I guess my former bravado covered for me. The officers let me go after taking my name from my identification card and asking a few questions about how the scene had looked when I first came back to it. Cars were piling up around the intersection and the two troopers were out taking names and directing traffic with an air of business-as-usual.

As I drove away, I could see, in the rearview mirror, the warning light on top of the squad car. It was still swinging its red cyclopean glare fruitlessly over the bright new landscape. At the turn-off, I hesitated, then dismissed the idea of driving right on down to Mexico.

My wife was sitting out on the

terrace wearing a pretty little sunsuit when I got home. From the bowl she held at her breast, she threw crumbs of cornbread to the pigeons. The birds fluttered around her long beautiful legs. The cat lounged in her lap and the spring breeze rippled his black fur against her sunlit flesh. He disdained the pigeons. He was sitting where he belonged and his green eyes followed me intently.

Her smiling blue eyes followed me, too, and the gorgeous copper hair lifted in the breeze, a sacrilegious halo. Her painfully lovely words hung over the quiet terrace unanswered.

"Darling, I was wishing you would come back. I've been thinking delicious things about us all morning. Now we can spend the whole lovely day together, can't we?"

I went into the kitchen and fixed myself a double scotch and water. I came back out on the terrace and sat down in a deck chair and scorched that cat's green eyes with a glare.

"Drinking in the morning?" she asked pleasantly.

"In the morning. All morning."

"Darling, you're so handsome and wonderful, you should drink whenever you want."

I watched her face, the lovely face with the frank blue eyes and I asked, "What do you think has happened?"

She showed only a little sulkiness at the corners of her mouth because I hadn't answered her question. "I'm sure I don't know."

I watched her face closely. "Clearview is gone."

The cat leaped down from her lap and the pigeons exploded in a whirring cloud. Now that that cat had heard the news, he stalked off to commune with Beelzebub.

"I don't understand," my wife said puzzledly.

"Clearview has disappeared. Vanished. There's some other place there with different people."

At first, her expression didn't change. Then, slowly, she looked real pleased. I could see she didn't really believe me. It was just that the idea charmed her.

"You think you're not going to have to pay for your sins, don't you?" I said hotly. "Blowing your stack like a hiccuping fury all because a nice little girl with eyes like Ingrid Bergman's gets a crush on me."

I was so mad, I could feel the tears in my eyes. "She was a nice girl. Even if she did have designs. That's rather innocent, you know. At least she didn't sit up in *her* bed making towns disappear."

MY wife raised her chin and stared at me defiantly.

I went right on. "Listen to me. You get into that car and drive down to Clearview. Just try to find

it. Apologize to some of those poor women you were damning last night."

"I'll do no such thing," she said flatly.

I put down my glass and got up and walked over to her. I took her arm in a firm grip and helped her across the terrace. I gave her just enough of a boot to send her off in a gay mood. She stood beside the Buick seething and trying to outglare me. Then she flung herself into the car and spun it out of the drive kicking gravel at me.

I went back into the kitchen and whistled a little tune while I fixed another Scotch. They were going to have some new problems to think about at the Institute of Higher Learning. Maybe, in the interests of science, they would have to stuff my wife and keep her in a glass case at Princeton.

She was back almost before she had started. Now that I knew her for what she was, I wasn't a bit surprised that that should be one of her minor powers.

I heard her slide the car half of the way up the drive and presently she burst into the kitchen. She stood there with her lower lip trembling.

Do you know what she said? She said, "Oh, darling! Clearview is gone!"

I shrugged. "I saw that for myself. What did you have to do with it?"

"Do you really think what I said last night . . . Is it possible I . . .?"

"You," I said, "are a witch."

The phone was ringing and I went across the kitchen to answer it. It was the sheriff.

I said, "Oh, hi! I told you I'd get you elected again. You got a pretty soft spot, too. This county is so quiet, it's just melting away."

"Don't be cute. This is a national emergency. The F.B.I. is swarming in in droves."

"Has that filling station attendant sworn that he is not now and never has been?"

"I'm sorry we have such a smart guy among the witnesses. I'd like the F.B.I. to get a better impression of the folks around here. You and your wife patched things up yet?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Everybody in Oaktown knew she was going to throw the cards at you last night."

"Oaktown, too? They better watch out how they talk over there. My wife . . ."

"You got a good little girl there. I don't know why you have to go fooling around."

I GRINNED across the kitchen at my wife. "Sheriff says you're a good little girl. I think he means to dance the macabre with."

"You'll have to bring her along," the sheriff said, "to back

up your statements at the investigation over here."

"Where Clearview was?"

"No. That's all blocked off. Except we're bringing those strangers in here to Oaktown for the investigation at the courthouse. Everybody else that was there early, including you, is wanted here."

"When?"

"Now."

"I've been drinking."

"You sure are going to hell, aren't you?"

"Going," I said. "What makes you think we're not there already?"

I put the receiver back and turned to my wife. She was standing with her fists clenched at her sides, crying quietly and gritting back the small lonely sounds.

I went over and put my arms around her and she just stood that way with her face buried in my shoulder.

"You don't cry much like a witch," I said. "Maybe it isn't true. Neither of us have suspected your powers and the scientists just haven't gotten around to recording such things."

She raised her head. "Oh, darling, I hope they never do. They mustn't find out."

I stroked her beautiful copper hair reassuringly. "Don't worry about it. We'll go to that investigation and tell them everybody

in Clearview was a fellow-traveler. That'll put them hot on the wrong scent."

I didn't have to tell them anything like that. They had combed forty or so people, including the filling station attendant and his senile wife and little girl, out of the area formerly occupied by Clearview. Here they all were in the Oaktown courthouse with only one obstinate fact in mind—there was no such town as Clearview and there never had been.

After I had been in that room for some time, I began to realize that there were several peculiarities about the group being investigated. The males were of all different ages. The females, however, were of only two ages—very old women, some of whom were married to men in their twenties, and little girls of eight. There were nine little girls of eight and each had a different daddy who held her on his lap or stroked her red hair while she stood beside him.

There were eight little boys who sat solemnly alone.

I began to feel the shade of Sigmund Freud, heavy and oppressive, in that room. Suddenly I understood what had made the filling station attendant seem so familiar.

He was a weathered but exact replica of my wife's father.

All the men were my wife's father at different ages.

All the little girls were my wife. The solemn little boys were myself.

WHEN I turned to look at my wife sitting beside me, she was very pale. When she faced me, however, she blushed. The blush got deeper and deeper. It crimsoned her throat and flamed across her cheekbones. She gulped and turned away from me.

"You ought to be ashamed," I whispered. "Couldn't you have made at least one of the daddies be me? Couldn't you have given him a pretty young brunette wife for the purpose of spanking your little eight-year-old bottom?"

She shivered and grasped my arm, whispering frantically. "Darling, don't let them find out. Please—please!—don't let them find out."

Some investigation that was! It was short, too. These investigators weren't going to settle for anything less mundane than a Communist plot, and these suspects, who fumbled so earnestly to give any kind of answers at all, became increasingly unworldly.

Finally, when the F.B.I. men had about exhausted their possible attacks and suspicions, a little old lady rose on quaking legs. She pointed a bony finger at a handsome twenty-year-old replica of my wife's father.

She stood that way, pointing the trembling talon. It occurred

to me that her faded eyes might once have looked like Ingrid Bergman's and I glanced at my wife in disgust. The whole room was hushed by the terrible sight of the old lady pointing at the young man.

My wife did not look at me. She buried her shattered face in her hands.

The chief investigator himself was disturbed by the old woman's mad silence. "Madam, you have something you wish to say?"

The ancient vocal cords gathered themselves around a knot of anger and hissed, "He's one. He's a Communist."

Now that he had this accusation, the investigator knew it wasn't so. "What makes you think so?"

"He's an infidel and he wants free love. He threatened to leave

me this morning. He's going to the city and get young girls."

I had to put my arm around my wife and draw her to me, she was trembling so.

Just when the paralyzed silence in the room had become an agony, one of the F.B.I. men burst out plaintively, "I don't think this is a case for our bureau."

With admirable speed, it was decided to hurry the forty or so people who were from out of this world back to their strange area and hold them there. The rest of us were dismissed.

OUT on the courthouse steps, the spring day was dying in gouty of bloody light. Our friend, the sheriff, came up and tipped his hat to my wife. To me he said, "You still drinking?"

"Sure," I answered. "It's the



only way to stay sober around here."

"Let's walk over to the Flamingo and I'll buy you folks a martini."

My wife grabbed that martini like it was her mother's hand. The sheriff is a big, sad man and he looked at her sadly. He looked at me sternly.

"I noticed how pale this little girl was during the investigation," he said. "It's a shame a lug like you gives her such a bad time. Why don't you straighten up and keep her name out of the Wednesday bridge gabble?"

"I definitely intend to," I assured him. "I do definitely intend to. There will be no more chits and antics in my young life."

The sheriff turned apologetically to my wife. "I think he means it."

"Oh, she knows I mean it. If I toy with a notion like that, I toy with the fate of hundreds. That isn't what's worrying her. She's trying to be a good little girl and confess she did it."

My wife looked at me as though I had stabbed her.

"Did what?" the sheriff said levelly.

"Blotted out Clearview."

My wife shuddered at the statement and gulped the rest of her drink. Then, like a condemned woman forgiving her accuser, she reached over and squeezed my

hand. "Darling, is it all right if I have another martini?"

I took a bill out of my pocket and handed it to the sheriff. "I need a word with the prisoner. Be a good fellow and go over to the bar and get three more for us."

He went, with no injury to his dignity, and I took both of her hands in mine. "Darling, you'll see he won't believe it. Nobody will believe it who's going to hear about it. Even if the sheriff was convinced, he probably wouldn't tell any of his colleagues."



for fear they'd have his head tapped. Of course, if you're going to make a practice of this sort of thing, the sheriff will see his duty and I will have done mine."

"Oh, darling, I won't ever do it again! I won't ever lose my temper again and I'll stop concentrating on what I'm doing. Why, darling, if you want to go out with other girls, I'll be happy about it and I'll . . ."

"Hold it! Hold it! Let's not tear out our hair or rend our breasts. Let's just tell the sheriff what happened and then go home and live a quiet life with our love and guilt."

THE sheriff came back and put our drinks on the table with domesticated ease. He sat down then and looked at me sternly. "Now, what was this you were saying about this little girl?"

"She cast a curse on Clearview. Of course, I suppose every town in the country is being cursed by some woman every night. If there are occasional incantations that make a spot in the universe go 'poof,' then, sooner or later, one of them is going to hit a town. It follows that some woman will wake up to find herself a witch."

The sheriff was looking at me with distaste, but I went right ahead. "That's a good theory you might pass along for old time's sake. For your exclusive interest,

we have further particulars. Those people you picked up in that area aren't real. They're zombies or something that she created. Those old hags are aged replicas of Clearview women who used to be her friends."

The sheriff had had enough. "Let's have no more of this foolishness. I've known this little girl since she was a little girl, and even if such a thing were possible, she's not the kind."

"She put a stink bomb in the ventilation system at the grade school," I reminded him.

"Let's not forget who's the guilty party at this table. This little girl has had plenty of reason to be angry with those Clearview gossips, but behind all that was you cutting up like a young he-goat."

We both turned in masculine panic, for my wife was sobbing. She did not bow her head or try to hide. The eyes were closed and the full mouth drawn in her pale face, and she was like a tortured saint.

"I did it! I sent all those good people to their doom!" Her remorse streamed down her cheeks and fell in her empty glass. "Oh, darling, how I wish I could bring back all those good people!"

There was a rolling boom of thunder that wasn't thunder. There was a brittle shifting in the foundation of the universe and, for a stunning moment, everything about

us was lighted from within.

The bartender turned from where he was polishing glasses.

"What on earth happened?"

SITTING there in the Flamingo, my wife and I looked at each other. She pushed her fists into her eyes like a little girl to wipe away her tears. I smiled and she smiled.

The sheriff asked, "Was that it?"

Still looking at me and smiling, my wife nodded and he got up and went out. My wife leaned toward me and kissed my mouth.

Then she said, "You know, I'll have to warn our children about controlling their tempers. Then, too, maybe we can bring them up

to have a lack of concentration—or just the normal amount."

"I suppose so," I said. "I would like one of them to pitch for the Yanks, though."

I met that girl from Clearview on the street shortly afterward. Following her brief sojourn in wherever it was, she had joined the Salvation Army. She told me she finds it a deep and richly rewarding experience. I wished her luck and got away fast.

She does have eyes like Ingrid Bergman's, but you'll never get me to admit that to my wife.

Wyman Guin

PREDICTION

CALL ME WIZARD, the novella by Evelyn E. Smith in the next issue, is based upon just about the dirtiest trick any devious schemer ever played on an unsuspecting victim. It's the old story of one man coveting another man's wife and opportunities for success, and getting rid of him with magical deftness. There is one difference, however . . . the wife coveted by the schemer is his own and the man he gets rid of is himself! "How's that again?" you ask? Afraid you'll have to wait and see for yourself.

G'RILLA by Willom Morrison is a heartbreaker of a novelet, despite its fearsome title. There is a nocturnal visitor with a remarkable taste in food . . . a girl who could recognize what she saw if she could only see well enough . . . a brother with excellent vision, but too young to know what he's seen . . . and as distracted a pair of parents as ever tried to cope with an impossible situation.

Jerome Bixby's novelet takes you **HALFWAY TO HELL** or just far enough to appreciate the world of the living. The trouble with sin is that it's so damned complicated! Unless, of course, one has some really hot connections . . .

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